

## **HARRY POTTER AND THE DEFIANCE OF THE HERO**

We live in a world of infinite possibilities; a planet that is absolutely teeming with life and colour, with beauty and art, and with mystery and intrigue. To many our planet is just one in a universe of such a sheer magnitude that it is beyond comprehension. A relatively small, blue planet that rotates around an insignificant sun on the spiral arm in a galaxy of, again, unimaginable size. An important planet none the less, as it is the only one we are ever going to live on.

Magic thrives on this world. It is in the planet's very veins, pulsing, changing, creating... and destroying. It even creates boundaries that can and do separate universes.

At any one moment a billion different choices or decisions lead this world down its set path. But what if those choices had been different...? What if a decision made was different from what was supposed to happen? It could be something as meaningless as crossing a road, or as shattering as preventing the death of a friend. You could either choose to cross that road, or not. It may not seem to matter at the time, but what you choose will unstoppably map out the course of the rest of your life.

Suppose you do choose to cross that road, but end up under the wheels of a bus. You would have made a decision that ended your life. What would have happened, how many lives would have been different or affected by yours if you chose not to cross that road? What course would the world and universe have taken then?

Where do all these other paths lead? The roads not taken? The chance... of choice.

This, of course, leads to the question of parallel universes. Crossing that road ended your life but, perhaps, in some unreachable reality, on another world, in another universe, you chose not to cross that road. You're still alive there, so how different would that world be with you continuously effecting events and making choices. It wouldn't be the world you died in... For every choice you make, an alternate choice may be played out in another place.

This idea suggests that there is more than one universe, and each is separated from the others. Unreachable, untouchable, inaccessible. In truth we interact with these "hidden" universes all the time, in many different ways. It is only through the awesome power of magic that these other worlds are kept separated from each other.

No spell, no incantation, no potion has ever been known or used to try and break the invisible barrier between universes. No one even knew that one existed, or could be used so simply. None that is... until now.

*Magic is blood, and blood is magic.*

The fate of a hero, of a boy ruled by destiny and prophecy, has just been thrown into question and doubt as he becomes the first mortal being ever to defy the strongest law of magic.... and live.

But just because the barriers and boundaries of alternate universes can be broken, does not mean that they should. Consequences beyond imagination may occur now that one has stepped above the plane of existence, and into the unknown.

## Chapter 1 - A Thought Was All It Took

*As the wind blew his hair about and he limped the last few steps over to the blackness of the circular tear in front of him, an unexpected calm floated over Harry. He knew what he had to do, and he accepted that. All the fights, all the anguish, all the loss and personal pain had led to this one moment, where the fate of a thousand lives and that of the world rested on his actions. A painful destiny had to be realised. He had to sacrifice himself to the unknown, and stop the inevitable.*

*With a final deep breath, Harry simply fell forward and into the blackness of the blood magic in front of him.*

*~~ Harry Potter and the Sword of the Hero, Chapter Twenty Nine*

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Harry gasped as he was submerged in piercing cold water. The cold stabbed him like a thousand sharp needles and all the air was thrust from his lungs. He lost complete feeling in his wounded shoulder and he felt his glasses fall from his face and float away through the dark, unforgiving cold of the water.

Despite his shock, he made a vain attempt to catch them but a swift current took them away. The current pushed him forward straight into a ball of bright light, and suddenly Harry had an idea of what infinity looked like.

He was no longer submerged in cold water but stood high atop a mountain. Stars stretched on for an incomprehensible distance and he fell backwards from the clear shock of how far he could see into the Universe, and how insignificant he was against it. No cold or darkness affected him anymore, although he knew it should. He wasn't wearing his glasses but that didn't seem to matter anymore.

Harry lay on his back staring into a star-filled sky and gazing into what was infinite. It was beyond his imagination to grasp just how far it stretched. The sheer distance of the Universe around him simply defeated his mind. He lay there battered and bruised, his bloodied

and torn shoulder bled heavily once again, as did his scar... but Harry could not feel it, and therefore did not notice it.

It was strange though. He knew he should be feeling it, but it was as if the place he was now in didn't abide by the laws of pain and feeling. He could not feel a thing... absolutely nothing.

As soon as he realised this the world fell away beneath him, and Harry screamed as he began to fall through an impenetrable darkness. What once had been infinity was now simply nothingness. He was falling from nothing, and into nothing. There was no sound, no colour, and no movement.... and yet Harry simply knew that he was falling. It was unnerving, and the pain in his shoulder and scar returned with a renewed ferocity.

It was the first feeling he had had in several minutes, and it hurt so much that he instantly passed out from it.

When Harry awoke he saw a thousand pinpricks of light had surrounded him. They were like little stars, but he reached out and grasped one in his hand. It was warm to the touch and felt like a drop of water. Suddenly the 'drops' of light began to spin around Harry incredibly fast, until they became a blur of nothing that disappeared before his eyes.

*Where am I?* Harry thought nervously. *I fell into the circle...*

A howling wind rang throughout the darkness around him, and for a moment Harry could not breathe as he was tossed across vast distances and through endless space. He gasped desperately for air and after a moment it returned, as did the light. The tiny pinpricks of starlight surrounded Harry once again, only this time they began to join with one another, creating bigger balls of light. This happened for several minutes, although time had no meaning here, and when it was over a ball of light about the size of Harry himself floated in the darkness in front of him.

Harry stared at it with unfocused eyes for a long time. It did nothing, simply floated in front of him as he was suspended in the darkness. Long, quiet hours passed in which Harry drifted in and out of

consciousness, and the sphere of light remained unmoved in front of him.

As time slipped slowly by, he thought about his life, and what choices had led him to wherever he was now. Harry seemed to be able to think with crystal clarity here, with no distractions and nothing but a warm glow of light in front of him. He thought of all the pain and the few good times that had made it all worth it. But mostly he thought of Ginny.

*Where am I?* he wondered briefly, as a more rational part of his mind awoke. He floated gracefully around the ball of light and bit his lip against the numb pain in his shoulder. He chanced a look at it and cringed when he saw the deep gash and congealed blood crusted onto his ruined dragon armour. The white polo shirt he was wearing hung loosely to his body as it was torn, bloodied and burnt in several places. His jeans and boots were similar to the shirt.

"Where am I?" he croaked, using his voice for the first time in... he wasn't sure how long. Those words carried for miles in the darkness and didn't die out like sound normally does. They rang throughout and across worlds, reverberating for minutes.

And then for the first time since it had been created, the light in front of Harry shimmered and rippled with life.

*"The Stream,"* a voice from within the light said. It was a cool, clear, crisp voice that held no accent. Harry couldn't even tell if it was male or female, it seemed to be both at once.

Harry, startled, stared incredulously at the light in front of him. "Hello...?" he whispered.

*"Hello,"* the same voice replied.

Harry fell silent as he circled the rippling light. It had no distinguishable features, but he felt as if it was watching him as he watched it. "Where am I?" Harry asked again.

*"The Stream,"* the voice repeated calmly.

Harry sighed and, at that moment, felt very, very tired. He had done too much, seen too much. He didn't want to have to deal with this, but then he wanted to be back with Ginny. So...

"What is The Stream?" he asked to the sphere of light.

The light still held no distinguishable features, other than it was bright, but Harry still got the feeling that it was *thinking* about his question. *"The Stream,"* began the light, *"is a boundary."*

Harry frowned and continued to float around the light, his shoulder and other wounds aching terribly. "A boundary? A boundary for what?"

*"It is a boundary that separates the Universes. That keeps everything created in one world remaining in that world."*

Harry's mind didn't even begin to comprehend that. "...And who are you?" he asked quietly.

Again Harry thought that the light was thinking extremely hard, although it didn't change in the slightest. *"I am a guardian,"* it finally answered.

"Of what?"

*"Magic,"* was the one-worded answer.

Harry tore his gaze from the light and looked around, in hopes of seeing anything familiar that he could gain some sense of reality from. It was nothing but complete and utter darkness in every direction. He rubbed his forehead as the pain in his scar grew and sighed.

*"Who are you?"* asked the light.

Harry turned back to it and through the growing pain, spoke. "Me? I'm Harry, Harry Potter."

*"And why are you here, Harry Potter?"*

Harry frowned. "I don't know? Still not exactly sure where 'here' is."

*"This is The Stream."*

"So you said," Harry nodded. "How can I leave?"

Again, Harry perceived that the light was thinking although it didn't move or change in any visible way. *"I can help you find a path when the time is right... but I would like to talk with you some more. It has been countless aeons since anybody entered The Stream, let alone a mortal."*

"There are people who will be worried about me..." Harry said.

*"And yet you left them?"*

Harry shook his head. "I saved them."

The light shimmered and grew in size, before shrinking again. *"Indeed. You sacrificed yourself into the strongest blood magic that exists in the mortal world... and lived!"*

"What was that?" Harry questioned. "That rip, that circle of dark light that I stepped into?"

A deep thrumming sound emanated from the light and Harry had to look away for a moment as it glowed brighter before dimming again. *"It was a gateway into The Stream. Had you not stopped it with your blood then it would have grown until it collapsed in on itself."*

"Taking Hogwarts with it," Harry stated.

*"Taking your planet with it,"* the voice gently corrected and Harry gasped. *"Do not be troubled,"* the voice of the Guardian continued quickly. *"You did prevent the destruction, but only just."*

Harry let out a breath he didn't realise he was holding. "So where do we go from here?"

*"From here? From here you can go anywhere you wish..."*

"I want to return to where I came from," Harry said quickly and without any hesitation.

The light wavered and moved closer to Harry. It grew so close that it was almost touching him, and Harry could feel the heat and pure, raw power emanating from the white of the light. After a moment it spoke, and Harry thought it sounded shocked.

*"You carry the Mark of Death!"* it shouted, with awe and a grave respect mingled into its voice.

"This thing?" questioned Harry calmly, reaching up with his good arm and gently touching his sore scar. "This was slapped on me years ago."

*"I see now..."* whispered the voice. *"I see why entering The Stream did not kill you..."*

"Should it have?" asked Harry, wincing as his shoulder twinged with pain.

*"It should have torn you from existence, destroyed your mind, and thrown you across many universes,"* the Guardian replied calmly. *"But obviously it didn't."*

"Thankfully," Harry replied matter of factly. "But why?"

*"Why didn't it destroy you?"* asked the Guardian light and Harry nodded. *"Because of the Mark of Death. You should have been killed by the Avada Kedavra magic, as all who have suffered it have."*

"Yeah," Harry said, and clicked his teeth thoughtfully. "That curse has its work cut out when it hits me."

*"You have survived it more than once?"* asked the Guardian unbelievably.

"Twice now," Harry said with a nod. "But why did that stop this- this Stream from killing me?"

*"You may have survived the curse but that does not mean you escaped unscathed. As I said, the Mark of Death is upon you. The Stream recognised that, and assumed you were dead. It is an*



*incredible oversight really..."* the voice in the light trailed away to nothing.

"Well I always have been the exception to the rule," Harry shrugged, and winced as this movement affected his shattered shoulder.

*"I agree,"* the voice said but it sounded worried. *"This has never happened before. Not in any of the Universes throughout the course of time. A mortal in The Stream is unheard of and... unexpected. This changes the perception of magic itself!"*

Harry nodded but he was weakening by the minute now. His shoulder was cold and that feeling was slowly spreading from the wound and into the rest of his body. He took a deep breath and sighed.

"So how can I leave?" he asked.

The Guardian, the voice in the light, seemed not to hear him. It was muttering to itself. *"Survived Avada Kedavra... broke the boundary... entered the Stream and lived."* The light grew again and Harry thought he caught a glimpse of a pair of deep eyes within it for only a moment.

*"What a story your life would make..."* the Guardian said to Harry eventually, and with a profound curiosity in its voice.

"I'll tell you about it sometime," Harry said quickly, panting heavily. "But I want to leave...."

*"Very well,"* the voice answered. *"Where would you like to go?"*

Harry frowned. "Back to where I came from...." he said, as if that was obvious.

The light shimmered and grew unexpectedly. It began to float around Harry and swirl terribly fast. After a moment it stopped. *"You really have no idea of the power you possess, do you?"*

Harry gritted his teeth as the movement of the light had caused him to jerk his shoulder and reopen the crusted wound. "In a few minutes,"

he said through the pain and tears in his eyes. "It isn't going to matter. I'm dying."

*"No... You're not. You're far too strong to die. One with power such as yours can choose his own death. And I doubt you want to die now."*

"Look," Harry said fairly strongly. "I don't want this power. Send me home."

*"You can survive The Stream!"* the Guardian continued. *"You, literally, have all the powers in the Universe at your command. You can choose any world to call your home."*

"I only want one," Harry replied.

*"Think of the possibilities, Harry,"* the Guardian whispered. *"You have a power now that none have ever had!"*

Harry shook his head. "And I don't want it!" he practically shouted.

*"Surviving The Stream is impossible, Harry. No one has ever and probably will ever do so again. Choose carefully now... because you are giving up the power of a God. What do you want?"*

The pain in his shoulder was now freezing his very flesh and bones. He felt it clawing at his heart, straining to get an icy grip over him. His scar was almost the exact opposite, scorchingly hot. Despite himself Harry found himself thinking about what he did want, what he had always wanted. His thoughts strayed from his own world and he thought of Sirius, and his parents. He thought of James and Lily Potter.

*A thought was all it took....*

*"Destiny has a strange way of forging power, Harry,"* the Guardian said quietly as he began to lose complete consciousness. *"I see what you want, and what you have always wanted. You have chosen wisely... that world is in need of a hero."*

"...What...?" Harry said with a harsh scratch to his voice, his eyes flickering between life and death.

*"Farewell, Harry Potter," the Guardian said with a sense of finality. "I hope we meet again, under better circumstances, and you can tell me your story."*

The world blurred and Harry gasped as he was once again doused in freezing cold water. Or so he thought. It did not feel wet, but only cold. As he slowly slipped into unconsciousness, the last thing he saw was a mass of great stars and light rushing past him as he was thrown across and through The Stream. He was literally being thrown across the vastness of a universe.

A howling wind filled his ears and soon the darkness faded and was replaced by a shining white light in every direction, the only other colour was his shadow reflected across the long miles behind him. There was a sound like the tearing of paper and a deep gash opened in the space before him, and a gust of rushing wind pushed him up and into it.

Instantly a great weight seemed to be lifted from Harry's shoulders and a world seemed to spring to life around him. Harry, although closer to death now than he had ever been, saw through his blurred vision the outline of rushing people and looking up he saw clouds in a blue sky.

It ended there, and Harry finally closed his eyes, for what felt like the final time.

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*Choice... everything always comes back to choice. One choice leads down a path that affects the lives of hundreds for years to come, and other choices are sometimes meaningless, pointless, and futile.*

*One choice, made by a man in 1981 led to the death of those who called him friend, and condemned another to twelve years in one of the worst places on earth. These choices shattered this man, ruined his life and many others... but a Dark Lord fell because of his choice to betray.*

*Good had come from evil.*

*But what if that choice was never made? What if the man chose to remain loyal to his friends, and die in their stead? Choice can have a cruel way of destroying men and restoring hope, but never can pure good come from it. Evil will always find a way to exist, and a broken choice can give it a way to win.*

*Some things should never be changed....*

**Godric's  
Halloween Night 1981**

**Hollow**

A breeze blew silently across the top of the forest. It was a cold breeze and brought with it the beginnings of winter and the frost. The wind blew out of the forest and against the gravelled brick of a small cottage that, although you would never notice it, was protected by a Fidelius charm.

Inside this simple, small cottage lived a family of three. James, Lily, and Harry Potter. For the most part a happy family, but they had their secrets, their choices, and their sacrifices.

A war was being fought in their world, the Wizarding world, and it was unclear on which side many belonged, or which side would eventually win. James and Lily were on the right side, and for that they are hunted. But young Harry was more of an uncertainty in the war than anything else. It was prophesised he would end this war, but he was no more than a year old, and yet he must defeat the strongest Dark Lord in existence.

The Dark Lord Voldemort seeks to destroy Harry Potter simply because he was born. And this night would be the beginning of all decisions.... Many choices will have to be made to decide what course this world will take, and sometimes these choices aren't as black and white as they seem....

*James Potter stood silently at his window.* For three months now he and Lily had lived in hiding at Godric's Hollow with Harry, all for Harry. He stood invisible against the darkness of the night and held his wand firmly in his hand as his dark shadow flew across the room.

James sighed and looked over to the sleeping baby in his mother's arms on the other side of the room. Lily had fallen asleep with Harry in her arms. With a flick of his wand James checked the wards for what must have been the hundredth time that day. *Something was not right*, and he knew it.

But the wards were in place, and the night was quiet. Nothing stirred, and as James turned away from the paned glass window he did not see a figure appear in the darkness at the foot of the garden. A swish of the figure's cloak later and he began to move up towards the small cottage, his wand shaking in his hand.

"Lily," James whispered. "You should get into bed, love."

Lily's eyes fluttered open slowly and James smiled. "James..." she said sleepily but then her eyes flew open. "Where's Harry!?"

James smiled gently and ran a hand through his son's already unmanageable hair. Lily relaxed as she recognised the comfortable weight of Harry in her arms and the two of them smiled as he slept on oblivious to the danger his life was in.

"I think something is wrong, Lily," James said eventually, leaning against a chest of drawers.

"With what?" she asked, cradling young Harry.

James clicked his teeth and tapped his foot against the hard wooden floor. "I'm not sure..." he managed. "I think the wards-"

**KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!**

James jumped as if stung and three brief seconds later he ran out of the bedroom door and down the stairs towards the front door. He told Lily to hide quickly and prepared himself for the worst. But as he ran down the stairs a few things struck him as odd. One, Voldemort and the Death Eaters would never knock on the door and that only Peter could find them here. He was their Secret-Keeper, and one of their best friends.

Nevertheless he already had a curse on the tip of his tongue that would kill a man. Anyone threatening his family would die, and die quickly. Making not a single sound, James reached the bottom of the stairs and his eyes fell upon the dark silhouette of a man framed outside the door.

His eyes narrowed and he was just about to blast the door to pieces when the figure knocked again. James frowned. This was not proper bad guy procedure. Carefully, slowly, James approached the door and the dark figure knocked a third time. James got the impression that the figure was nervous and worried, and desperately wanted him to answer the door.

So he did.

Ever so slowly, James flicked his wand and the door began to open. He stood hidden in the shadows just to the left of the stairs and waited for the figure to enter.

"JAMES?" called the figure and almost instantly James relaxed. "LILY? Is anybody here?"

"Peter..." James whispered, stepping out of the shadows and using his wand to light up Peter's face. "What the hell are you doing here? You scared me half to death!"

Peter sighed and grasped his friend's robes tightly. "You and Lily have to run now, James," Peter said strongly, his eyes twitching and sweat beading on his forehead.

James frowned and then, with a strength that belied his shape, he grabbed Peter by the throat and pushed him up against the wall.

"Ja-" began Peter but was silenced a moment later by the look in his friend's eyes.

With a flick of his wand James cut off the arm of Peter's robes, as a cool breeze blew in through the still open front door. He then brought the light of it to rest on Peter's arm and James spat and recoiled slightly as he beheld the disfiguring Dark Mark burnt into Peter's skin.

"Peter," James began slowly. "What have you done?"

A tear fell from Peter's eye as he saw the look of betrayal mixed with confusion on James' face. "There is no time now, James," he said quietly. "He's coming. I told him where you are. I couldn't resist."

"We trusted you," James hissed fiercely. "With our lives. With *Harry's* life.... and you're a Death Eater!"

"Run, James," Peter sobbed. "He's coming."

James bit his bottom lip and looked down to the ground, still holding Peter up against the wall. A thousand thoughts whirled through his head as the severity of the situation hit him hard. *Voldemort was coming! He was coming to kill Harry... and Lily. There's no time to summon the Order or the Ministry... DAMN IT!*

With a tired sigh James let Peter go and he fell to the ground coughing. "Why did you come here tonight, Peter?" he asked quietly.

Peter coughed and then smiled softly. "I would rather die for the right choice, than live for the wrong one.... Go James, give Lily and Harry my love. Tell them I'm sorry."

Not wasting another second, James turned and taking a deep breath, lunged up the stairs as fast as he could. He didn't wait to see what Peter did, nor did he care. Right now it was all about Lily and Harry.

"LILY!" he called, running back into the bedroom. "LILY!"

There was a scraping sound and a second later Lily threw off James' invisibility cloak. He turned and saw the two of them, mother and son, huddled in the corner. "We have to go," he said quickly, running over and helping his wife up. "Peter is downstairs and Voldemort is coming."

Lily gasped and James saw the terror reflected in her eyes. "It's going to be okay," he said, trying to reassure himself as well. "We can use the floo that Dumbledore set up to take us to Hogwarts, but we have to go now."

James and Lily flew down the stairs with Harry resting in Lily's arms. He was awake now and looking around at the world in confusion, a naive curiosity. They found Peter at the bottom of the stairs, shaking uncontrollably and grasping his left forearm in pain. Both Potter's knew what that meant.

They ran passed him and over to the fireplace on the far wall of the living room, just as a flash of light lit up the sky outside. "Oh God..." Lily breathed.

"Quickly now," James said, pushing Lily into the fireplace. They both knew that two people travelling on the same floo powder was never comfortable, and sometimes fell just short of agony, but Lily had to escape with Harry. "Here," James whispered offering her the floo powder. "Be safe," he added.

With tears in her eyes Lily dropped the floo powder and great green flames swallowed both her and Harry, sending them to Hogwarts. James sighed with relief and was about to step into the fireplace himself when he remembered Peter.

"Damn..." he breathed. He couldn't leave him. They had been friends for a decade, and in the end he had done the right thing. *Marauders always*. James pocketed the small satchel of floo powder and ran back out towards the stairs, wand in hand.

He ran into the entrance hall and looked to where he had last seen Peter. He was no longer there. James turned and saw the open front door, and it was then that his heart skipped a few beats. His mind jumped back to the flashing light he had seen just before reaching the fireplace with Lily. It had been the light of death, it had been the Killing Curse.

"Hello, James," hissed the voice of a madman from within the door frame.

James' eyes widened at the sight of Lord Voldemort, but he grasped his wand hard and his resolve was strengthened as he saw the prone form of Peter lying at the Dark Lord's feet. He was dead, killed for his betrayal.



"Hi," James replied lamely, fighting to keep his voice steady and his emotions in check. "If you came for Harry he's gone. You'll never touch him."

Voldemort had his wand drawn against James' heart, and James had his raised likewise. They stood only ten or so feet apart, and both of them remained unmoved and unblinking.

"Your son will die, James," Voldemort spat, stepping through the doorway and into the cold house. "None can survive my power."

James frowned and a hard edge crept into his voice. "My son will kill you one day, Voldemort," he said fiercely.

Voldemort's eyes blazed with anger underneath his dark hood. "*REDUCTO!*" he cried and a torrent of red light shot from his wand towards James.

James had always prided himself on the fact that he had achieved the highest score on his NEWT exam out of his whole year in Defence Against the Dark Arts, and that, coupled with the brief Auror training he had had, saved his life then.

With a cry James jumped backwards and purposely tripped over his own feet, bringing himself down to the floor as the red light of the blasting curse reverberated over him and singed his robes and hair. He landed hard on the ground and raised his wand. Not fast enough. As the stairs behind him exploded into a thousand splinters of wood from the blasting curse, the Dark Lord attacked again.

"*Crucio!*" Voldemort whispered almost lazily, and James wreathed in pain as his nerves burned and his insides boiled.

Half a minute later and Voldemort lifted his wand and broke the connection. James lay panting on the floor as the stairs burned from the fire of the blasting curse. Smoke and ash gathered in the air and the flames licked at the carpet he lay on. Breathing heavily, James looked up into the eyes of the demon and spat out some blood.

"The end will be quick, James," Voldemort assured him, "and so will young Harry's and that of your Mudblood wife. They will not suffer."

James laughed harshly and wiped the blood from his mouth as the second floor began to burn. "You should know something about me, Voldemort," he said quietly, but then gained strength. "My friends and I, the Marauder's, we always managed to get out of any situation."

"Peter did not," Voldemort smiled, his wand pointed between James eyes. "And neither will you, or Harry."

James' eyes narrowed. "And one more thing," he began. "Whenever the people we cared about were threatened, we were famous for making very stupid moves."

And with that James lunged forward at Voldemort, but as he did transformed into a stag. *Prongs*. He changed into his Animagus form and charged at Voldemort with a great fury in his eyes.

For a moment Voldemort didn't react, completely thrown of balance by the fact James Potter was an Animagus. At the last possible moment he apparated to safety just as Prongs would have run him through, and reappeared almost instantly in the same place.

James didn't stop running as he charged through where Voldemort had stood only moments ago. Bounding over Peter's body, James ran off down the garden path and into the night as he heard his home, his cottage in Godric's Hollow, exploding under the power of the Dark Lord's fury. Down the road and he came to a line of trees. He entered the forest, and didn't turn back.

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*Almost ten years later*  
*Diagon Alley, August 31<sup>st</sup>*

Harry Potter walked quietly down the busy street of Diagon Alley with his brother and sister on either side of him. His mother walked behind him and standing strongly in front of him was his father. Harry knew they were there to protect him, from the Death Eaters and Voldemort. His parents had told him as much.

Despite that, Harry was excited. Tomorrow he would be boarding the Hogwarts Express for the first time. He had been eleven for just one

month now and had received his letter the day of his birthday. Today he and his family had come to Diagon Alley to purchase his school supplies.

Harry had lived a very secluded life, and he understood why. A year ago his parents had told him that the Dark Lord wanted to kill him, to hurt him if he could. They had not told him why and he hadn't asked, but he knew when to keep his head down and when to accept the little outings into the world when they came.

Harry looked at his father as they walked down the busy street towards Gringott's. He wasn't overly tall but Harry knew that he was both magically and physically strong. Everyone was always saying how much he and his father looked alike (although Uncle Remus and Sirius had told him that there were potions that could change that) and Harry was proud of his dad. The only notable difference between them was that Harry had his mother's eyes.

To his left walked his younger brother Michael. Michael was seven and Harry held his hand strongly. Although his brother was protecting him, Harry would not let anybody hurt him. Michael had taken more after his mother. He had scruffy red hair and blue eyes with a pointed face and sharp eyebrows.

They walked past a group of people who had their hoods up, obscuring their faces and as they passed Lily put a steady hand on Harry's shoulder, and James put himself in between the strangers and Harry. They passed without incident and Harry relaxed and his sister placed another warm hand on his shoulder.

Harry turned to the right and smiled at his sister. At nine years old Melissa Potter didn't really resemble any one parent. She was an equal mix of the two. She had her father's hazel eyes and her mother's long red hair. She was about as tall as Harry was (a fact she never failed to remind him of) and liked to look after her older brother. All three siblings had known what it was like to live constantly on the run in fear of the Dark Lord, and a war that none of them could escape.

Harry blinked and readjusted his glasses as they continued down the street towards Gringotts. They passed by Flourish and Blott's and his

mother told him they would be back there later to buy his books. Ollivander's was what Harry was looking forward to the most, but they passed that as well and after a few minutes reached the goblin bank.

A quick cart ride later, Harry noticed that only he and his father actually enjoyed it, and they stocked up on gold for the day's shopping. Back outside, and the family was in a lighter mood. As they made their way around the bookshop, Harry kept thinking about all the sacrifices that had been made to bring him here.

His father had become a Secret Keeper for the family, and they lived for the most part in a cottage near Hogsmeade. James had gone back to work as an Auror after Peter had been murdered at Godric's Hollow and, along with Uncle Sirius, were the two most successful fighters there under Alastor Moody.

But after Voldemort had attacked Hogsmeade searching for Harry when he was seven, James had accepted the post of Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts, and had moved the family into the castle for the most part. That didn't last long as four separate attempts on Harry's life had been made in only two months and it was endangering the students, as well as the Potter's.

So James once again became the Secret Keeper for the family and they had moved to a location on the coast of Scotland, and only James knew where it was. He stayed on as Defence teacher and Lily worked at the school as well under Madam Pomfrey as an assistant in healing. Remus had become their guardian for a time during the days and many safety measures were in place for all three Potter children to escape the seaside home if needs be.

All in all it had not been an easy life for any of the Potters, and Harry had never been fully told why they were so targeted. He knew it had something to do with him, but when he ever breached the subject his parents would get angry, and sometimes his mother cried. Harry didn't want that, so he didn't bring the topic up again.

After Flourish and Blott's, Harry and James headed over to Ollivander's, while Lily, Michael and Melissa bought potion supplies and cauldrons. Both father and son entered the dusty shop and were disconcerted at how eerily silent it was.

"Hello?" called James as Harry examined the wand seated on a pillow in the window. "Ollivander?"

Harry turned as there was a shuffling behind the counter and from down the dusty corridor came a short man with long, wiry hair and eerie, moon-like eyes "Mr. Potter," Ollivander said, looking at James before his eyes travelled over to Harry. "And Mr. Potter," he finished with a smile. "I knew I would be seeing you soon enough."

James nodded and offered a small smile to the wandmaker. "Can we hurry please, Ollivander," he said. "It isn't safe."

"Where is nowadays?" Ollivander mused and then set his tape measure to work on Harry.

Harry, who had grown up around magic and magical items, didn't bat an eye as the measure travelled up and down his body of its own volition. When it was finished, Ollivander pocketed it again and headed into the stacks of wands behind the counter. He emerged after a minute carrying three different boxes, containing six different wands, two to a box.

He gave the first one to Harry and he flicked it inexpertly. No good, the counter was on fire. James laughed and doused the flames in cold water. Another wand and this time Harry barely held it before Ollivander tore it out of his hand. They went through all of the wands Ollivander had selected and none of them were quite right.

"Not to worry," Ollivander said as he saw the crest fallen look on Harry's face. "It is near impossible to select the right wand straight away."

Harry nodded and James cast a quick glance out of the window. Over the next half an hour Harry tried over fifty different wands. None of them were any good and Ollivander was frowning as he returned the fifty first. "Perhaps," he began slowly. "Perhaps..."

"What is it?" asked James.

Ollivander disappeared into the stacks again and emerged five minutes later after much searching. He was holding a simple black

box and his hand shook slightly as he removed the wand from its box. He held it for a moment in indecision, looking from Harry to James and then back to the wand in his hand.

"Eleven inches," he began, "Holly and Phoenix feather... Almost one of its kind."

Five minutes later and Harry and James walked back out onto the sunny street of Diagon Alley with his new wand. James was worried as he and Ollivander had had a whispered conversation on the origins of the wand. It was Voldemort's brother wand. He shuddered, and put a guiding hand on his eldest child's shoulder. *Things are happening too fast* he thought.

"James!" called a familiar voice. "Harry!"

James and Harry turned and spotted Lily with Michael and Melissa enjoying an ice cream outside in the sun at Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour. They made their way over.

"Did you get a wand then?" Lily asked Harry happily.

"Yes," he replied just as happily and pulled the box out of his bag. "Eleven inches, Holly and Phoenix feather."

"Almost one of a kind...." James said slowly and cast a worried glance at Lily.

After Harry and James had bought ice creams of their own, the five of them sat outside the parlour talking happily as the Wizarding world passed them by. Clouds had begun to gather over the sky now and James mentioned getting home. Lily agreed and after collecting all their bags, they headed for the floo in the Leaky Cauldron.

The sky continued to grow darker as they walked up Diagon Alley, and no one thought anything of it. James was up front again and it was he who felt them first. No one else noticed it, no one suspected a thing. Almost instantly, the sky grew so dark it was as night. James gasped and clutched his chest as he began to feel the first effects of the Dementors.

"Lily," he gasped as the entire street began to feel the creatures of darkness. "Run... Leaky Cauldron."

*It was far too late.*

Descending from the darkness on the roofs of the shops, twelve Dementors glided silently down onto the unsuspecting shoppers. All were feeling the effects now and James had begun to shake uncontrollably. Harry was miserable and his brother and sister were crying.

"Come on," said Lily quickly, desperately and pulled the emergency Portkey out of her robes pocket. "HARRY, MELISSA, MICHAEL! Hold on."

Lily thrust the Portkey into Michael's hand and grasped Melissa's arm tightly, still holding Michael. As the screams began to resound up and down the street, Harry jumped over to his brother and grabbed his other arm. They were all connected... except for James, who was struggling to raise his wand against the approaching Dementors.

Harry watched with a growing fear as the creatures moved ever closer to his father. And just as his mother pointed her wand at the Portkey, and cried "*Activate*" he saw something that made him forget about escaping to safety.

James raised his wand at the nearest Dementor but his mind was screaming the worst parts of his life at him. He couldn't concentrate. "*Expecto...*" he tried. With a frustrated sigh he looked over to see Lily organising the Portkey and smiled to Harry as he knew he would escape.

Harry saw his father smile but his own blood ran cold. There were more Dementors than his father thought. Five were advancing up the street towards him, but another three were descending from the rooftop just behind him. James couldn't see them, but Harry could.

"DAD!" he cried, letting go of Michael just a small second before the Portkey activated. Lily's eyes widened in absolute terror as she shimmered away to the safety of their seaside home, but it was too late to do anything.

Panicking shoppers were running and screaming up and down the street and Harry was pushed back and forth as he tried to reach his father. "DAD!" he cried again.

James struggled against the foggiess in his mind and tried to summon a happy thought. *Come on!* he screamed to himself. *Anything? Lily!*

"*EXPECTO PATRONUM!*" he cried and a misty silver fog shot out of his wand and formed a shield between himself and the Dementors in front of him. He didn't see the ones approaching from behind. Harry did.

Pushing himself through the crowd Harry ran over to his father. "DAD! BEHIND YOU!" he called and James looked up suddenly, his eyes reflecting the fear he now felt.

"Harry?" he whispered and fell onto his back and into a roll. He was now facing three more Dementors that stood barely ten feet away. He tried to summon another happy thought. *The day I married Lily!* "*EXPECTO PATRONUM!*" Harry smiled and ran over to his father's side as a great, silver griffin burst out of his wand and ran the Dementors down.

"Nice one, Dad," Harry said happily and James offered his son the smallest of smiles.

"Thanks, Harry," he said but then his face turned serious. "We have to get you out of here before-"

POP! A loud, ominous pop echoed up and down the street just behind James and he gasped. Without the need to look, he knew who had just appeared.

"Hello again, James," hissed a voice colder than the Dementors, and a thousand times more evil.

Without even turning around to face the Dark Lord, James grabbed Harry and picked him up. A half second later, and he was tearing up the street faster than he had ever ran before. It wasn't fast enough.



POP!

James stumbled and almost fell as Lord Voldemort appeared in front of him, only six feet away. He turned again but saw the Death Eaters closing in behind him, killing shoppers and innocents that got in their way.

"James, you of all people should know the futility of running. None escape my grasp for long," spat Voldemort.

James put Harry down and held him close against his body while he raised his wand. Harry for his part glared violently at Voldemort, who had only briefly glanced at him. "Leave, Voldemort," James said with a courage surpassing anything he had ever felt before.

Voldemort merely laughed. "You should have known this day would come, James," he hissed. "Known that young Harry was living on ten years of borrowed time."

Harry, despite himself, shuddered as the Dark Lord's gaze fell upon him. "Never," James began, "without a fight."

Voldemort blinked in surprise. "You wish to duel... me?"

James nodded and pushed Harry off of the street and into the alcove of the front of a shop. He looked around himself for a brief moment and assessed the situation. He saw a dozen Death Eaters forming a line behind him and a row of bodies all around them. Terrified witches and wizards stood frozen against walls and inside shops as James challenged Voldemort. Not one of them moved. No one was fighting. No one would dare defy the Dark Lord. Except one...

"Now," James said quickly. "*Constrictus Amropa!*" James had struck first and coils of hard chains shot from his wand like snakes and made to devour Voldemort.

Voldemort laughed and sidestepped the chains and conjured some of his own, which were complete with burning flames. One of the chains closed around James' ankle and threw him high into the air, before letting him go. He fell to the ground and landed with a sickening crunch, his collarbone shattered.

"Come now, Potter," Voldemort laughed. "You're better than this."

James' eyes blazed with fury and not wasting a minute he stood, ignoring the pain in his shoulder. "You don't have to worry about your son," he growled. "*Incendio!*"

The Dark Lord batted the jet of flames away as if they were nothing. "No... *my* son is loyal to the true power in this world."

That one caught James. *Voldemort has a son!*

The Dark Lord used that moment of hesitation. "*Imperio!*" he cried.

James raised the most powerful shield he could and the Imperius curse was deflected, but only just. "*Cusindeo!*" he returned fire with a bone breaking curse.

Voldemort was incredibly fast though and he responded with a Vestic curse. Dark red light met purple in mid air and the two spells collided, sending showers of sparks everywhere. The duel became one sided after only a few minutes, and James no longer had time to think, only defend as the Dark Lord slowly devoured his strength.

The Death Eaters were laughing and Harry didn't know what to do. No one in Diagon Alley seemed to know what to do as James and Voldemort duelled. Cobblestone and debris was thrown everywhere as James deflected dark spells into the ground and surrounding buildings.

It was all for naught though, as a spell broke through his defences. "*Wesudone,*" hissed Voldemort, with a flick of his wand.

The dark spell hit James full in the chest and sent him sailing backwards into one of the walls of Flourish and Blott's. The impact didn't shatter the glass in the wall but it did splinter the wood, and as James fell he knew he had broken some ribs. James hit the ground and almost dropped his wand. He looked up in time to see the Dark Lord pointing his wand at him again. He had no chance of blocking the next curse.

"*Crucio!*"

James screamed and dropped his wand which rolled away uselessly. His mind and nerves were on fire as the Cruciatus assaulted his body. But a far deeper pain cut into him so strongly that he cried out in despair. He had all but failed his son.

Harry cried out and ran into the street as James wreathed in unbearable pain. The Death Eaters all raised their wands on him at once as he ran, but he was defenceless. "STOP IT!" Harry shouted viciously.

Surprisingly enough Voldemort did stop, and turned to face Harry as James rolled over on the ground and began coughing violently. He spat out some blood and tried desperately to regain control over his body. "You do not fear me, Harry Potter?" Voldemort asked, his wand pointed between Harry's eyes.

"NO!" Harry replied untruthfully. In reality he was terrified beyond belief. Though he did receive a little satisfaction when he saw Voldemort's eyes blaze with anger.

"For years you have eluded me, boy," the Dark Lord began. "A prophecy brought us together, and I am about to remove that threat."

Harry began to move backwards, his eyes jumping from his father, to the Death Eaters, to all the other witches and wizards, and then finally to Voldemort. He stepped backwards and tripped over a small pothole in the cobblestone. With a cry he landed on his back and looked up fearfully at the Dark Lord.

"NO!" James called as Voldemort turned his wand onto Harry.

Voldemort smiled and nodded to one of the Death Eaters. The Death Eater flicked his wand and James was suddenly levitated into the air, where he hung suspended over the street with a clear view of Harry and the Dark Lord. He couldn't move, couldn't speak. He could only watch.

Harry made a weak attempt to stand but Voldemort knocked him back down with a wave of power shot from his wand. "No more running, boy," whispered Voldemort quietly. "This is how it has to be. Are you watching, James?" questioned Voldemort finally, with a

glance over at his suspended form. "Know what your defiance has now cost you!"

And as the Death Eaters guarded over their master, and the other witches and wizards still stood unmoving, locked in absolute terror. Voldemort looked down upon Harry for the final time, and spoke two words that changed the course of the world forever.

*"AVADA KEDAVRA!"*

Gasps and screams rang out from the innocents around the street and the Death Eaters remained unmoving. James' eyes widened, the only part of him that he could move and his soul cried out from within. The green light of death burst forth from Voldemort's wand like a whip, and screamed through the air towards Harry.

From his position on the ground Harry screamed and made an attempt to move, but he was frozen in fear. He saw the green light grow ever closer until it filled all his vision. He closed his eyes as he felt the curse, and never opened them again.

James died as well. His mind could not process what had just happened for a long moment and he cried when it finally did. The hope of the entire world had just died but James couldn't care less. That hope had been his son.

Tears of despair, of grief, of sadness, of loss streamed down his face and still he couldn't move from his suspended position above the street. He looked down to Harry's lifeless body and when he looked up again, Voldemort was all he could see.

With a fury he had never felt before, James desperately struggled against the magical bonds holding him in place. He couldn't destroy them though, but the pure fury and hatred in his eyes said all that he could have.

"This is what happens to those who defy the Dark Lord," hissed Voldemort, talking to the dozens of witches and wizards in the street. "James Potter defied me, and now his eldest son is dead. Do not make his mistakes."

James cried at the world for its unfairness and for creating such a creature of pure evil. He cried for Harry most of all though. "This is what happens when you try to be a hero, James," Voldemort turned and spoke so only James could hear. "But this is not your end."

James looked unflinching into Voldemort's eyes, and emitted pure fury and hate towards the Dark Lord. If he could have spoken, or moved, he would have ripped him apart wand or no wand.

"Your constant defiance has cost me much, James," Voldemort continued. "But now I condemn you to live so that your desire for revenge will consume you. You will die slowly, James. Farewell."

And with a pop, Voldemort was gone and so were the Death Eaters. James fell to the ground as his bonds disappeared and as soon as he could, he cried out in pain and loss. He did not hear the other small pops, that signalled the arrival of the Aurors.

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<i>Almost</i>	<i>six</i>	<i>years</i>	<i>later</i>
<i>Present</i>			<i>Day</i>
<i>March 25, 1997</i>			

It was a quiet March morning as Melissa Potter walked across the castle grounds with her friends. They were heading for fourth year Care of Magical Creatures with Professor Hagrid, the half-giant who had been given the job by Headmaster Dumbledore only two years ago after the previous teacher had been killed by Death Eaters.

There was nothing in the wind that blew, or in the clouds that were slowly gathering, to suggest that all was not right in the air. If anyone had really concentrated on it, they would have sensed a deep, electrical throb in the air. It was as if the world was holding its breath.

Melissa walked in between her friends as the three of them climbed over a small rise and Hagrid's cabin came into view. Half the class was already there and it was mostly Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws.

A cold wind blew her auburn hair around her face and she laughed as one of her friends told a small joke. It was good to laugh as the war

raged on outside Hogwarts. It gave her some sense of normality after the devastating event that had almost destroyed her family six years ago in Diagon Alley. Melissa shuddered when she thought of that and pushed it to the back of her mind.

Hagrid was introducing the Aethonon today, which was a breed of winged horse, chestnut in colour, which lived mainly in Britain. That promised to be fun. As Melissa walked, she began to feel a certain... charge in the air. She frowned, as she could taste copper on her tongue; like a tangy metallic flavour in the back of her throat. The wind had died down, and a quiet but distracting ringing was echoing across the grounds.

Melissa was not the only one to notice it either. Several people in her class were looking around in confusion and others were shaking their heads, as if to clear it of the ringing. As Melissa took another step the ground shook underneath her feet, and the wind returned with unbearable strength and a great howl.

It was so strong that several people were blown to the ground as a great, cataclysmic BANG rocked the entire area. From the ground, Melissa looked up to the source of the explosion and saw something she could not quite believe was there. It was a... gap in the air.

Most of the other students were staring at it as well and Hagrid had come running out of his hut to investigate the explosion. He was looking at it, just as dumbfounded as the rest. Melissa continued to stare as this gap grew into a long, jagged black tear in the air and all light seemed to be drawn to it. All of a sudden the wind died down and a silence was cast eerily over the ground as this tear in the sky crackled and fizzled with untamed magic.

It was a long moment in which every pair of eyes was fixed upon this rough rip in the very air. It didn't seem physically possible that it should be there, all light was bending away from it as if it didn't exist, as though it was just something of an inconvenience to the natural order of things.

Melissa stared at it more than a little fearfully. Her mind jumped to many conclusions as to what it could be. *Some weapon of You-Know-Who* she thought most likely. Out of the corner of her eye she

saw Hagrid rushing her classmates into his cabin, while others had already made a dash for the castle. Her eyes returned to the tear in space.

It was then, just as Melissa returned her gaze to the tear, that a lone figure was thrown roughly from its unimaginable depths and tossed harshly onto the cold, icy ground. The figure didn't move as he struck the ground and the instant he did, the gap in the air sealed itself with the sound of a zip, and everything was normal again. Well, almost normal....

Melissa pushed the hair back out of her face and stood up slowly, straightening her crumpled robes as she went. She removed her wand from her pocket as her eyes fell on the broken, and battered form lying in the grass barely ten feet away from her. From where she now stood, she could see that this figure was in no good state. He looked dead to her.

Quickly, but cautiously, Melissa ran over to the figure just as her classmates began to appear from Hagrid's cabin, and from various places around the cabin. Her friends stood twelve feet behind her, seemingly at a loss as to what was happening. As she approached the fallen figure, Melissa heard a deep, rough sound. It took her a moment to realise it was the man (she could tell the figure was male) struggling to breathe.

When she finally reached the bloodied body, Melissa felt the whole world stop for one moment as her mind could not process what she was seeing. Falling to her knees, Melissa dropped her wand and stared unblinking at the *boy* before her.

He had serious injuries up and down his body and there seemed to be no part of him that wasn't bruised or bleeding. The worst wound was clearly his shoulder, which was all but missing. His leg hung at an odd angle and there was a deep cut in his forehead that was bleeding heavily. But all that was not what held Melissa's attention.

This was her father. This was James Potter.

*Only it wasn't* she had realised and that was why she had fallen to the ground. It looked remarkably like her dad, but it wasn't. The eyes that

blinked at her without focus were not hazel, but deep, emerald green... and he was too short to be her father. No, this was someone else. Someone she knew to be dead.

"OH MY GOD!" shouted a voice from behind Melissa but she barely heard it. "HAGRID! HE HAS TO GET TO THE HOSPITAL WING!"

A thousand impossible thoughts reeled through Melissa's mind. *It can't be... no... dead... who?* Taking a deep breath and sighing heavily, Melissa rose shakily to her feet, grabbing her wand as she went.

"Someone levitate 'im," Hagrid growled now that the whole class had gathered around the stranger. "Up ter the 'ospital wing."

Melissa shook her head and a shiver ran down her spine to her toes. With a flick of her wand she cried, "*Wingardium Leviosa!*"

The figure that so unmistakably resembled her dead brother, if he had lived, jumped and was levitated two feet above the ground. The crowd made a gap for Melissa as she ran with the figure held in front of her for the castle. Hagrid followed and told the rest of the class to take the period off and that they would catch up later.

Melissa felt sick to her stomach as she ran, not entirely sure what she was doing. Her mind kept screaming impossible answers at her and all she knew now was that, whoever this was, he was dying. All questions could be answered later. The cool spring wind blew her hair across her face as Melissa ran with Hagrid beside her, past the greenhouses, and up to the castle entrance. Hagrid jumped ahead and threw open the great oak doors and Melissa, panting slightly, ran in with Harry levitated before her.

As it was only second period, the castle was quiet and Melissa and Hagrid didn't run into anyone on their way up to the Hospital wing. Sweating and breathing heavily after her run, Melissa rounded the last corner and saw the double doors to the hospital where her mother and Madam Pomfrey worked.

The boy, Harry, had bled all the way up from the grounds and a long, crimson trail of blood drops had followed them the whole way. About



halfway down the hall, Hagrid put on a burst of speed that surprised Melissa and barged through the double doors, shouting as he went.

"LILY!" he called. "MADAM POMFREY!"

Nursing a stitch in her side, Melissa kept her wand focused on Harry. *Deep breaths* she thought as the pain in her side worsened. She could hear the boy, the stranger, her brother, the impostor, the injured figure, muttering small words and struggling to breathe. And just as she entered the hospital wing, she found herself repeating the same, silent mantra over and over again:

*Please don't die, please don't die, please don't die....*

Entering the infirmary, Melissa levitated Harry over to the nearest bed just as she saw Hagrid barge through the door to Madam Pomfrey and her mother's office, and heard their startled screams which were quickly overtaken by Hagrid's shouts. Taking a deep breath, Melissa collapsed into the chair next to the boy, and just simply stared at him.

She was at a loss as to what to do. There he was, a living, breathing, dying, person that could easily be mistaken for her brother if he had lived to be this age. Harry had always looked like her father, and this boy did as well. The only notable differences were the battle wounds and the lack of glasses.

Looking up sharply, Melissa saw Hagrid come bounding back down the hospital, with the obscured figures of Madam Pomfrey and her mother behind him. *Oh God...* Melissa thought suddenly, *what is Mum going to think?* But there was no time for that now, as they had finally reached the bed.

Melissa stood up fast and knocked the chair back against the wall. She ran over to her mother and grabbed her hand just as Lily's eyes fell upon the broken figure in the bed. Madam Pomfrey was straight into it though. She had her wand out and was assessing the injuries quickly, expertly.

Hagrid stood in the background for a moment, and then excused himself back to his cabin, where he still had to harness the Aethonon's. Lily Potter, for her part, just stood rigid with her heart in

her throat, as she saw a pair of emerald green eyes open lazily and stare at her. They were closed again a moment later, and then Lily remembered to breathe.

"Mum..." began Melissa.

"Go and get your father, Melissa," Lily said quietly, with no emotion in her voice.

"But he'll be teaching..."

Lily shook her head and moved only an inch closer to the bed. "It doesn't matter... send him here, and then go and get Professor Dumbledore."

"But shouldn't-"

"Melissa!" Lily said sternly, her eyes rimmed with tears. "Please just do it."

With a sigh, Melissa agreed and then turned on her heel, and hurried out of the hospital wing. She began at a jog, as her father's classroom was on the other side of the school, and the Headmaster's study was twice as far on the way back.

Melissa held her wand strongly as she went, and all the while one question burnt furiously in her brain.

*What the hell is going on?*

\*\*\*\*

*Darkness.*

*A pain in his shoulder that he could not see, or feel with his hands.*

*Darkness.*

*Floating in the abyss, the cold freezing the blood in his veins.*

*Darkness.*

*A warm wind blew into his face, though he had no idea why it should...*

*Darkness.*

*Memories swirled past him, and he felt terribly alone, naked against the vastness of magic and creation.*

*Darkness.*

*His memory faded and was replaced with consciousness, but suddenly Death grasped his heart in an icy grip... and squeezed.*

*Nothing but Darkness.*

*Three Hours Later*

Harry slowly opened his eyes and the first thing that assaulted them was bright, unrelenting sunlight. With a quiet cry of pain, Harry tried to shield his eyes with his arms but he couldn't move them. He swallowed and breathed in heavily as everything swam unfocusedly before his eyes. His throat was harsh and it hurt to swallow.

He took another breath only this time he began to cough violently, and again he struggled to move his arms and legs, but he could only just move them. It took him a moment to realise he was tied down.

"Hel..." he tried to speak as he could see dark, blurry shadows standing over him, and now that Harry was more awake, he began to fully feel the deep, throbbing pain in his shoulder. For a moment he could not remember why it hurt but then suddenly everything came crashing down around him, and he passed out.

The sun was just setting on the castle as Harry awoke again, and this time the faint, lingering light in the room was easier on his eyes. He could only just make out his surroundings, and he recognised the room he was in dimly as the Hogwarts Hospital Wing. He breathed a sigh of relief... but something was not right. He looked around again through his blurred vision and he picked out figures standing near and around his bed.

"Hello..." he managed, but the effort of speaking drained him of all his strength. The last thing Harry saw before he lost consciousness again was... himself. Standing over his bed was a figure that looked almost exactly like him; almost, but not quite. It was unnerving, and it sent Harry to sleep with troubled dreams.

*"You can't go through there, Harry," Ginny almost screamed, looking in fear at the growing darkness that was the tear in space in front of her. "You don't know where you'll end up."*

*"That doesn't matter," he replied, shaking his head as a single tear fell from his eye. "Voldemort has been beaten back for awhile. I intend to be back before he is."*

*Ginny started to cry and she sniffed, looking at the ground and not at Harry. "I almost lost you a moment ago," she managed. "I don't want to lose you now."*

*Harry lifted her chin up until she was looking into his eyes and he back into hers. Then slowly, but gently, he kissed her deeply and wrapped his good arm around her. "I'll come back, Ginny," he whispered in her ear as she wrapped her own arms around him tightly. "I promise..."*

Harry woke up screaming and thrashing in the bed as his shoulder ached furiously and his broken leg was a dull throb. He panted heavily as he saw the pale light of dawn shining in through one of the high windows he knew belonged to the hospital.

He felt much stronger now that he had had some sleep and was desperate to find out what was going on. *The Stream* he thought, *the Guardian... was that all a dream?* Harry again tried to move his arms from his side, but he could only do so an inch before he felt resistance. He frowned and looked down to his left arm. Although he wasn't wearing his glasses, Harry could see a brown strap of leather that tied him securely to the bed frame. A look to his other arm showed the same thing.

"What the...?" he began and pulled on the restraints. He couldn't do much with his right arm as it was still weak at the shoulder, but he pulled with all his strength at the left bind.

"Good morning," said a calm, quiet, and previously unnoticed voice to the side of his bed.

Harry stopped and stared in the direction of the voice. He could vaguely make out a silvery, tall figure standing just to his left. "Professor Dumbledore," he said with a harsh sting in his throat, "Is that you?"

The voice paused for a moment and Harry could see the figure move slightly. "Who are you?" the figure asked.

"Professor... It's me Harry, Harry Potter" Harry replied with a note of confusion in his voice. He heard several sharp intakes of breath to his right and when he looked he could just make out two figures sitting on the bed next to his. They were a blur though.

"Harry Potter is dead," replied the voice of Albus Dumbledore, somewhat sadly.

Harry frowned and once again pulled against the restraints that held him down. "I'm fairly certain I'm alive, Professor," he replied with an edge to his voice. Harry knew he could use his wandless magic to destroy the straps holding him down, but something told him not to at that point.

Harry shook his head as he felt a tingling sensation inside his skull. It took him a moment to realise that it was the sharp, probing spike of a Legilimens. Someone was trying to read his mind. Quick as a flash, Harry raised his strong defences that Minra had taught him earlier that year. He felt the intruder's surprise, and then their slow retreat out of his mind.

"Who was that?" he asked angrily, looking from side to side and cursing his poor vision. "Would someone please tell me what is going on? I am at Hogwarts, aren't I?"

"Indeed you are," replied Dumbledore and Harry once again tried to focus on him while keeping his occlumency shields intact.

"Then why am I tied to a bed?" Harry asked incredulously. Nothing was making any sense to him, and a small part of his mind knew

something was different with the world, but he couldn't for the life of him pinpoint what it was.

"You have been restrained until we know your identity, and whether or not you pose us a threat. Spies are everywhere these days," Dumbledore replied.

"Spy...!" Harry said with a harsh laugh. "Professor, where am I?" The small part of Harry's mind that felt something was wrong had begun to grow, and slowly he was beginning to grasp the enormity of what had happened to him. *It couldn't be possible...*

"You are at Hogwarts, as we have already established."

Harry swallowed hard and shook his head. "How... How did I get here?"

"You were brought in from the grounds yesterday morning. Apparently you appeared rather spectacularly during fourth year Care of Magical Creatures," Dumbledore told him.

It was all falling into place. Harry was slowly piecing together what had happened, from what he could remember, and what he was being told. "The Stream..." he said quietly. "Oh..."

"Are you carrying a wand?" questioned the familiar, yet cold voice of Albus Dumbledore. "We did not discover one upon you."

Harry felt sick to his stomach. "No... you know I don't have a wand. It was destroyed, Professor."

There was scattered whispering to his right and Harry turned to see three figures where there had been only two moments ago. "Who are you?" he asked.

There was no response, only a brief shuffling. "How were you injured?" asked Dumbledore. "What happened to you?"

Harry turned back to the silvery figure of Dumbledore, and then looked back to the other mysterious figures. Nothing made sense anymore. Harry didn't know who to trust, or even where he was. It

looked like the hospital wing, but he couldn't be sure. How did he even know he was talking to Dumbledore? One thing was certain, he no longer trusted anything.

"I- I don't know?" he lied. "I'm not sure what happened to me..."

Harry heard shuffling and saw Dumbledore, or who he assumed was Dumbledore, walk around his bed and over to the other figures beside him. Listening in carefully, he heard whispered conversation and only managed to catch one or two words.

"Polyjuice would have worn off...."

"There is no glamour..."

"He needs a pair of glasses...."

"What...?"

"But who..."

"I can't believe this...."

Harry continued to listen and he heard the three voices start to argue. Only Dumbledore's sounded familiar to him and as he strained to hear the others, Harry saw one of the figures... who had black hair, walk away towards the door. Dumbledore turned back to him.

"James has just gone to retrieve you a pair of glasses," he said.

Harry's heart skipped a few beats. "...James...?" he managed as his broken leg continued to ache. He could feel the bone salve working its magic though, so it would be better soon.

Harry heard Dumbledore sigh and then saw him sit down in a chair next to him. Now that he was a lot closer, Harry could see him better. It was Dumbledore; of that much he was certain. You couldn't fake the familiar twinkle in his eye. Harry stared at him, hoping for some answers to questions he didn't even know.

"Who are you?" asked the headmaster quietly.

"Harry James Potter," Harry replied truthfully.

Apparently that was not the answer anybody had wanted, as there was a stifled cry from the shadowy figure behind Dumbledore, and Dumbledore himself shook his head slowly. "You cannot be..." he said sadly.

"I am," Harry replied strongly, as his mind jumped to the only conclusion left as to what had happened. Nothing had been a dream, nothing had been fake. He had crossed over into another world, apparently a world where he was dead.

Dumbledore surveyed the battered and bruised boy in front of him, strapped to the hospital bed. "You don't have a wand... Harry?" he asked, and his voice shook when saying that name.

"I don't," Harry answered with a shake of his head.

A moment later he felt the straps tying him down disappear, and he moved his arm for the first time. It cracked and ached as he brought it up to his forehead, and down the jagged scar that cut across it. He just had to reassure himself it was still there, as he could not feel it burning as he usually did.

"Thanks," he said, and pulled himself up in the bed. He couldn't use his right arm and his left leg was shattered, but healing. Just as he did this, the door to the hospital wing opened again quickly, and the man who had left only minutes ago returned.

Harry desperately tried to focus on this figure, but he was too far away to make out. *James...* Dumbledore had called him. *It can't be...*

"Thank you, James," Dumbledore whispered as the figure passed him a small object. "Here we are."

Dumbledore handed Harry a pair of small, silver rimmed glasses and for one, agonising moment Harry didn't know whether he should put them on. He had a fair idea of what he would see if he did, and he didn't know if was ready for it. He was, in one word, *afraid*.



Taking his time, Harry slowly unfolded the glasses, and then brought them up to his eyes. He was looking down as he put them on and he saw the bed come into clear as he did. His stomach was doing flips as he worked up the courage to look up, and after a moment he did.

It was then that everything he had thought was constant was ripped away at its foundations, and his universe was turned up on its head. *Good God!* he thought as his emerald green eyes were pierced by an equally sharp pair of the same colour.

Everything finally fell into place and Harry accepted what had happened. He had, as the Guardian had put it, crossed the boundary between universes. A thought was all it took, one simple thought about his parents and he had been thrown across time and space into another world where they were alive.

"Mum... Dad..." he managed, looking at the now clear figures of Lily and James Potter standing behind Dumbledore. "No... It can't be."

James Potter took one slow step towards Harry in the bed, and looked deep into his eyes. It was a long moment before he looked away, until he was certain of what he was seeing. "Your eyes are..." he began and looked quickly at Lily, who had tears falling down her cheeks.

Dumbledore stood up first, and then looked down to Harry. "You have some explaining to do, Harry" he said. "Because I do not think you belong here."

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## Chapter 2 - Familiar, Yet Different

*Human beings are perhaps never more frightening than when they are convinced beyond doubt that they are right.*

*~~Laurens Van der Post*

*Magic, thought Harry bitterly, what is the point?*

He sat silently in the wooden armchair in front of Dumbledore's desk as the headmaster himself watched him intently. Faint, thin beams of sunlight streamed in reproachfully, as if it sensed the tense atmosphere in the room. The dozens of previous headmasters in their portraits on the walls looked on with a mild, but concerned, curiosity, and Fawkes, the brilliant phoenix, did not lift his gaze from Harry. Which unnerved Harry slightly, but he wouldn't let it show.

Most of his thoughts were on the events that had transpired in the hospital wing only half an hour ago. His mother and father, James and Lily Potter, had looked at him with what Harry supposed was fear, before excusing themselves out of the room at Dumbledores request. James had to practically carry Lily out.

Since then Dumbledore had guided Harry to his office, he had to go slow as his leg was still healing, and now they sat on opposite sides of the desk, their gazes piercing each other unwaveringly. Harry was still reeling from the blow of what had happened though.

*I've travelled to another world!* he thought with an excited, fearful feeling in his stomach. *And I don't know if I can get back....*

It was an impossible notion, but entirely accepted now that it had happened. Harry had seen a lot of impossible events in his life, and this one had to top the list, but he would face it as well as he could. It would probably take awhile for it to fully sink in, but he didn't intend to be in this world that long. He knew the incantation that could open the hole in space, and as soon as his injuries healed he was gone.

*Tempus ac Capacitas*

Voldemort had used that, and this was Harry's reward for stopping him. He was trapped in a familiar, yet vastly different world. *Though he thought, I'll be home soon enough... and I can have a word with that Guardian for sending me here.*

But there was still one thing that Harry had learnt about this world in the short time he had been here. *He was dead.* The Harry Potter of this world had died somehow. This made Harry wonder whether or not Voldemort had met the same fate. He couldn't feel any pain or connection through his scar. He hadn't had a twitch out of it since arriving.

*I wonder if the other Harry killed him and then died himself?* pondered Harry as Dumbledore continued to stare at him unflinching. Harry's mind was still doing a mile a minute though as he tried to make sense of this strange but familiar world and learn what he could from what little information he had gathered.

*My scar may not be reacting,* Harry thought, *because we are not connected like in my world. The other Harry didn't survive Avada Kedavra or have his blood used in the resurrection.* Harry frowned and moved uncomfortably in his seat, for the first time he removed his gaze from Dumbledore's. *Perhaps he was never destroyed fifteen years ago. That would help explain why James and Lily Potter didn't die.*

"Lemon drop, Harry?" asked Dumbledore warily after a moment, offering the small paper bag to Harry.

"No thanks," Harry declined and returned his gaze to the headmaster.

"As you wish," shrugged Dumbledore and returned the bag to his desk draw.

Silence fell between them again and only Fawkes alleviated the situation by singing softly. "Why am I here?" asked Harry.

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows in what Harry recognised as a sign of thought. "Perhaps it would be best if we knew where you came from," Dumbledore suggested.

Harry clicked his tongue. "I came from here," he said with a shrug. "Hogwarts... has always been my home."

"You're dead, Harry," Dumbledore said emotionlessly, quickly. "You died nearly six years ago in Diagon Alley."

Harry shook his head slowly, and looked around helplessly. The shock was setting in. "I'm not your Harry..." he said, "I'm-"

"A traveller from another world?" Dumbledore asked solemnly.

Harry nodded and looked up at the portraits as they began to whisper furiously. He ran a shaking hand through his hair, as his shoulder throbbed with pain. "I didn't choose to come here," he said earnestly, and rubbed his shoulder.

Dumbledore blinked and his gaze turned to one of concern. "Madam Pomfrey could not heal your shoulder completely," he said. "There is some old magic at work in the wound that prevented magical healing. Tell me, what happened?"

Harry laughed harshly and took a deep breath. "Dodged a few curses, duelled a few enemies, stabbed by a magical sword... pretty average day up until that point."

"Who stabbed you, Harry?" asked Dumbledore, who was gripping the arms of his chair so hard his knuckles were turning white.

Harry leaned back with a sigh and stared into the past. "It was-"

The door to the headmaster's office was flung open quickly, and with a sense of urgency. A tall figure ran into the room, his black robes billowing out behind him and his hair clinging to his face from perspiration. He had just run the length of the castle and now swept into the room nervously.

"DUMBLEDORE!" the figure cried. "I just heard-"

"Calm down, Sirius," Dumbledore said, raising his hands. "What did you just hear?"

Sirius Black stood panting just inside the doorway of the study, and he gasped as his eyes fell on the chair in front of Dumbledore's desk. He couldn't see the boy's face in the chair, but the black hair was evidence enough.

"I heard that... that..." he was lost for words.

Dumbledore's eyes flicked from Sirius's and then back to Harry's. He was startled to see faint tears forming in the deep emerald green eyes of this young boy, who had so far shown little emotion. His gaze was unblinking and he did not turn around to look at Sirius.

"Leave us, Sirius," Dumbledore said quietly, an unmistakable tone in his voice. *This was an order.*

Biting his tongue, Sirius looked at the back of this boy again, before slowly edging his way out of the room, closing the door as he left.

For a long moment neither Harry nor Dumbledore spoke as he struggled to keep his emotions in check. The headmaster saw his bottom lip trembling and was, for once, at a loss as to what to do. He remained silent.

"That was a voice I never expected to hear again," Harry whispered.

"Sirius Black is..." began Dumbledore.

Harry removed his glasses and wiped his eyes. "Dead in my world," he eventually said.

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*Fifteen minutes later*

"From what I saw he could be," Sirius said, as James and Lily sat huddled together on a small bench up on the balcony of their room. Their children, Melissa and Michael, stood nearby. They had remained silent so far.

"But how?" asked James, a tear falling down his cheek as Lily shivered. "I... watched him die."

Sirius was pacing the room, an expression of deep thought upon his face. "Perhaps he... maybe... what if..?" he struggled to explain it and then threw his arms out in frustration. "I just don't see why anybody would fake this!"

"Or how they would do it," offered Melissa.

"Exactly," Sirius pointed at her. "Whoever he is, he is not using polyjuice."

"And there is no magical shielding on him either," Lily whispered. "I did the test myself after removing his broken dragon armour. He is not disguising his true appearance. What we saw is what he really looks like."

"So Harry is alive then!" Michael stated, and was met with cold silence. He was too trusting at his age. He was only in second year.

"Everyone is talking about Ha- *his* appearance," said Melissa. "It's all over the school. Many people saw him appear. They are saying he looks a lot like you, Dad."

James let Lily go and stood up. He began pacing next to Sirius. "I don't think this boy came to hurt us," he began, "and I don't know why he looks like our Harry... But we all know what will happen if Harry's name is linked with this boy."

Lily, Melissa, Michael and Sirius all looked up at James as he said this. "Voldemort..." Sirius whispered. "Aw shit! There is no way we can keep this from him."

"We have to try," Lily said quickly. "We can-"

"Lily," Sirius said sadly. "If he doesn't already know about this, he will soon. You know as well as any of us that Hogwarts is home to many Death Eaters in training. Draco Malfoy will jump at the chance to please his father."

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"You have to tell me, Harry. How can we trust you if you hide behind a veil of secrecy?"

Harry sighed with frustration and fatigue. "I told you, Dumbledore," he said tiredly. "I didn't choose to come here, and I'll leave as soon as I can."

Dumbledore shook his head as he assessed all of the scars he could see on the visible parts of Harry's body. On his arms and up to the most recent one on his shoulder, covered by his white polo shirt. Madam Pomfrey had said there was a long one on his back and a jagged, rough one on his leg. Complete with the small scars on his cheek, one on his left palm and the strangest one upon his forehead, Dumbledore could conclude that Harry had not had an easy life.

"How do you intend to leave?" he asked in an offhanded way, as if the question had no real significance. It was really what Dumbledore desired to know above all else right now.

Harry faltered and took a moment to answer. "I can... open a -er-door," he managed. "I don't think it will be easy, but I can find a way home."

Dumbledore didn't know what to make of that. "Why did you come here at all?" he asked, lacing his hands together.

Harry shrugged and thought of what had brought him here. "I didn't choose-" Suddenly, and viciously, pure pain assaulted his mind.

*The pain in his shoulder was now freezing his very flesh and bones. He felt it clawing at his heart, straining to get an icy grip over him. His scar was almost the exact opposite, scorchingly hot. Despite himself Harry found himself thinking about what he did want, what he had always wanted. His thoughts strayed from his own world and he thought of Sirius, and his parents. He thought of James and Lily Potter.*

*A thought was all it took....*

*"Destiny has a strange way of forging power, Harry," the Guardian said quietly as he began to lose complete consciousness. "I see what*

*you want, and what you have always wanted. You have chosen wisely... that world is in need of a hero."*

*"...What...?" Harry said with a harsh scratch to his voice, his eyes flickering between life and death.*

*"Farewell, Harry Potter," the Guardian said with a sense of finality. "I hope we meet again, under better circumstances, and you can tell me your story."*

Harry cried out in his chair and the whites of his eyes turned the deepest crimson as they became bloodshot. His arms flew around wildly as deep, unrelenting pain in his scar ripped into his skull and stopped all coherent thought. He thought he saw a deep red light before the darkness took him.

Dumbledore leapt up from his chair and drew his wand. He had watched Harry's eyes turn from white to red and it had truly scared him. Not much had had that effect on him in the latter part of his life, and he hadn't been this scared since he had learnt of their Harry's death six years ago. "HARRY!" he called.

But Harry was gone. He had fallen once again into unconsciousness.

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"What happened, Dumbledore?" asked James. "He's barely breathing."

James and Dumbledore stood over Harry's bed in the infirmary once again. After his collapse, Dumbledore had levitated Harry back to the Hospital and Madam Pomfrey had set to work on him.

"I am not sure, James," Albus said with a frown. "I asked him how he had arrived here, and then suddenly that scar on his forehead, *the lightning bolt*, began to glow a deep red and his eyes turned the same colour. He passed out."

James walked over to Harry and placed his hand over the scar on his forehead. He could feel the intense heat emanating from it. "Did you



find out who he is?" James asked, dreading the answer no matter what it was.

Dumbledore sighed and placed a hand on James's shoulder. "This boy, James, *is* Harry Potter."

James gave a hollow laugh that turned to desperate tears as he fell onto the bed behind him. "I watched him die, Albus," he said through the tears. "I saw that bastard kill him without hesitation and there was nothing I could do."

"You did everything you could have, James," Dumbledore said. "You did everything that was expected of you and more."

"Then why did I still lose?" he whispered hopelessly.

Dumbledore sat down next to him slowly and placed his hand once again on his shoulder. "You gave this world something it was lacking, James. Your losses, and your defiance, gave the world hope that there were those still willing to fight Voldemort."

"I gave up after Harry was killed," he replied sadly, and a little remorsefully.

"Did you?" Dumbledore pondered. "You're still with us, James, and that is what the world sees, and why we are still fighting today."

James sighed and rubbed his eyes in a manner that was familiar to Dumbledore. He had just watched Harry do the same thing up in his office. "Albus," James said after a moment, "if this is... Harry... then-"

"Fate may have given us another chance to end this war," Dumbledore said ominously. "But you must know one thing, James," he continued, staring strongly into James' hazel eyes, "he is not the Harry you lost. He is not even of this world."

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*One hour later*

Sirius stood silently at the head of his Transfiguration room and once again demonstrated his Animagus ability to the eager class. His sixth year Gryffindors watched with amazement and hope filled looks in their eyes, as the Slytherins watched with disapproval and scorn.

"Right," said Sirius after he had reverted to his human form. "How do you think I managed that?" he asked the class at large and, as usual, only one hand shot up instantly. "Ms. Granger?"

Hermione Granger smiled inwardly as she sensed house points on their way. "You are, as you were last year and the year before, a competent Animagus, Professor," she said and Sirius smiled. "Through study and intense practice you managed to alter your appearance into an animal that best describes your personality," Sirius smiled even wider as he realised what was coming. "A mangy dog," she finished and the Gryffindor's laughed, as did one or two Slytherins.

"Excellent," said Sirius happily. "Ten points to my intelligent Gryffindor's. Now," he continued, turning back to the class at large, "I didn't become an Animagus overnight, it took at least a week if I remember correctly." *More laughs.* "So for now I want you to read and revise chapter twelve and thirteen, before we attempt to delve any further into this branch of Transfiguration. Silently please."

As the class pulled out their textbooks, Sirius walked around his desk and sat down. He remembered back twenty years ago, when Minerva McGonagall had taught him Transfiguration in this chair. She would still be teaching it now if it hadn't been for that attack four years ago. *Damn you, Voldemort* he thought and rubbed his eyes as they glazed over with familiar tears.

So many lost, so many forgotten. There has been so much blood spilt of a generation that couldn't, and didn't deserve it. And it was all for one man in the end. *Tom Riddle.* Lord Voldemort. He has power and he uses it bitterly, and there is nothing they could do about it. *Try as we might* Sirius thought, *he is winning.*

Sirius sighed and looked up to his class as he heard muttered whispers being shared throughout the room. "I asked for silence," he

said calmly, shooting a disappointed glance at Neville Longbottom, who was talking the loudest to his little group of friends.

"Please sir," said Neville. "Perhaps you know something. We heard that something happened yesterday out on the grounds."

Sirius bit his tongue. "What did you hear?" he asked, his gaze momentarily flicking to Draco Malfoy, who sat three benches to the back on his left hand side.

"Just that the... air... split open," Neville began. "Or something like that... and a boy appeared. Everyone is talking about it."

Sirius shrugged. "It was probably nothing. Some accidental magic maybe?" he tried to sound offhanded but he definitely saw Malfoy sit up straighter.

"I heard," began Ron Weasley and Sirius turned to look at him, 'I heard that this bloke who appeared, it was Professor Potter."

"Didn't you lot just have Defence Against the Dark Arts with him?" asked Sirius with a frown.

"Nope," Seamus Finnegan answered. "He wasn't there; we had an hour and a half of Snape."

Sirius winced. "Ooh I'm sorry... but I assure you that James, Professor Potter, is fine. Saw him this morning." *That should do it* thought Sirius. *Narrowly avoided-*

"I heard that it was Professor Potter's son," Ron said loudly. "*Harry Potter.*"

Sirius looked back up sharply. *Shit! Shit! Shit!* he thought, as he saw Draco Malfoy staring at Ron with a smirk. "I thought it was well known," Sirius began carefully, "that James' son, Harry Potter, died six years ago. Murdered by Voldemort."

That shut them up quickly. Everyone fell silent at the mention of the Dark Lord's name, and Sirius inwardly sighed. Too much had been said. "Enough of this now," he said kindly at the pale faces before him.

"Just read the chapters for today and you can spend the rest of the lesson how you like."

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Harry opened his eyes slowly and took in the world around him once again. Impossible memories flooded his mind and he hoped and prayed it was all a dream. He knew it wasn't, but it was nice for a moment to think that it was possible.

Automatically, as he had done it so many times before, Harry reached over and picked up his glasses... James Potter's glasses from the bedside table and placed them over his eyes. The room came into focus and he sighed as he spotted Albus Dumbledore standing over his bed.

"Welcome back, Mr. Potter," said Dumbledore. "Tell me, how do you feel? You do not look too well."

Harry coughed and sat up in his bed. "However I look..." he managed. "I feel a hell of a lot worse."

Dumbledore smiled. "You suffered some sort of fit back in my office, and that scar on your forehead turned deep crimson, as did your eyes..."

"Did they?" he coughed, and swivelled his legs so they were hanging off the bed. "Well that's new."

Dumbledore frowned. "I advise you to take this more seriously, Harry. You could have died."

Harry sighed and offered Dumbledore a hollow laugh. "No I couldn't," he said. "If this world is anything like my own, we both know there is only one way I'm going to die."

*And either must die at the hand of the other....*

"How did you receive that scar?" Dumbledore asked, ignoring Harry's statement and motioning to the lightning bolt on his forehead that had caused him so much pain.

Harry took a deep breath and looked up and out of the infirmary window. "Sacrifice," he answered evasively and then stood up. He swayed on his feet slightly and Dumbledore placed a hand on his shoulder for support. That wasn't a good idea though as Harry winced in pain as the deep, healing gash in his shoulder was disturbed.

"I apologise," the headmaster said quickly.

"Don't worry about it," Harry waved him away and walked over to the bathroom, leaving Dumbledore standing alone in the infirmary.

Harry entered the bathroom and looked at himself in the mirror. It was true, he didn't look well. *I suppose that is to be expected* he thought, rubbing his scar, which was cold and unresponsive again. *I'd be more concerned if I looked fine after what I've been through these past few days.*

Removing his glasses, Harry turned on the tap and threw some cold water onto his face. Now that he was alone, he decided to check how strong his magic was. He had refrained from showing anyone in this world how strong magically he was, even without a wand, as he knew they would fear it and he would not be trusted. But that didn't matter if no one was around.

He remembered standing with Ginny back in his world, just as the gateway was destroying the forest around them, and before he made his sacrifice. He could not even manage a simple summoning charm at that point, his magic reserves low after surviving Avada Kedavra again, so he wanted to make sure they were back to normal.

'*Accio towel*,' he whispered, raising his palm. The white bath towel flew through the air and Harry caught it deftly, drying his face with it. After replacing his glasses, Harry tried some harder magic. He transfigured the towel in his hands into a small blue bird, which flew out of the open window.

Confident that his skills were still up to scratch, Harry felt around in his mind for his Animagus connection to the griffin. He knew better than to transform in this small bathroom, but he wanted to make sure it was still there. Sure enough, a moment of searching and he felt the

griffin, just waiting for him to transform. Harry smiled with relief and exited the bathroom.

"Everything okay?" asked Dumbledore, as he emerged back into the infirmary.

"Fine," Harry shrugged. "Didn't think I looked that bad though!"

Harry was heartened to see the familiar twinkle in Dumbledore's eyes. "Perhaps we should return to my office. You still need to explain one or two things to me."

Harry nodded but then once again swayed on his feet. He had just felt really dizzy and had almost fallen to his knees. "Actually," he said, holding his head against the spinning room. "Can we do it here, and maybe get something to eat."

Dumbledore nodded and once again appeared concerned. "Of course, Harry. You must be famished. It looks as though you haven't eaten in days."

Harry sat down on the end of one of the beds as Dumbledore conjured a table and chairs. "What is the date, by the way?" he asked. "I've been trying to figure it out and I think it must be the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March, am I right?"

"Close," said Dumbledore, now conjuring some sandwiches as he and Harry sat down at the small table. "It is the 27<sup>th</sup> of March. You arrived here early on the morning of the 25<sup>th</sup>."

Harry frowned. "But that means..." *I was in the Stream for four days! It felt like half an hour.*

"Yes?" urged Dumbledore as Harry tore into one of the chicken sandwiches.

Harry shook his head and swallowed. "Nothing... Just lost a few days somewhere."

"A rather odd thing to lose," Dumbledore smiled. "Tea?"

"Please," Harry replied, and Dumbledore conjured a teapot and cups. Picking up another sandwich, Harry felt the dizziness from his hunger disappearing. He sighed with relief.

"Now, Harry," began Dumbledore, "I think it best you explain exactly how you arrived here."

Harry took a slow sip of his tea as he tried to gather his thoughts. "Well," he whispered, "what you first have to understand is that I didn't choose to come to this world... sort of didn't choose to anyway."

"I'm sorry?" replied Dumbledore.

"I was *tricked* into coming here really. I only had to think about my parents and I was thrown into this world."

"James and Lily Potter," said Dumbledore.

Harry smiled sadly. "Yes... Anyway, I entered this *Stream*," he continued.

"A stream?" frowned Dumbledore. "A stream brought you to another world."

Harry nodded but then understood Dumbledore's confusion. "Oh! Not like a river, you see. It was more like a... a... nothingness. If that makes any sense?"

"None whatsoever," smiled Dumbledore. "But I sense some great magic was involved."

Harry took a deep breath. "Oh yes, very great magic," he said, thinking back to the rip in the air that could have destroyed Hogwarts, his world. "Very great magic," he repeated in a whisper.

Dumbledore nodded. "And do you intend to return to your world?" he asked seriously, staring deep into Harry's eyes.

Harry stared unflinchingly back. "Yes," he said without any hesitation but then frowned deeply.

"What is it?" asked Dumbledore.

Harry blinked and then looked back up to the headmaster. "I... The date I left... was the Vernal Equinox. Oh dear..."

"Is that a problem?"

Harry shrugged and picked up a third sandwich. "Maybe," he said quietly. "I think the magic that brought me here, can only be used on the vernal equinox."

Dumbledore sat up straighter in his chair. "The next equinox is not until the 20<sup>th</sup> of March 1998. Just under one full year, Harry."

Harry nodded and ran a nervous hand through his hair. *One year* he thought *I could be stuck here a year!*

"There is, of course," Dumbledore offered, "the Autumnal equinox in the Southern hemisphere. That is basically the same event, and is, this year, the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September."

Harry shook his head in confusion. "I don't know," he said quietly as a siren sounded around the castle that signalled the end of the period, and the beginning of lunch. "I simply do not know if that'll work."

"We will help you, Harry," smiled Dumbledore warmly. "But you must understand, a traveller from another world is unheard of, and I do not think that it will be kept quiet for long."

"I can look after myself," Harry said, a bit too strongly.

Dumbledore looked thoughtful for a moment. "Something you said earlier," he began carefully, "suggested to me that you may know of a certain... prophecy. Do you, Harry?"

"Oh I know all about that," Harry sighed. "*Either must die at the hand of the other?* Is that what you're talking about?"

Dumbledore nodded sadly. "Is Lord Voldemort alive in your world, Harry?"



Harry sat up in his chair and his hand flew up to his scar instinctively. "He was when I left," he said quickly. "Which means I can't spend a year here waiting for the goddamn equinox!"

Dumbledore sighed and Harry saw sadness reflected in his eyes. "You may have to-"

Suddenly, the doors to the infirmary were thrown open loudly, and a tall man with long, black billowing robes entered the room. Harry took one look at him and sighed, and Dumbledore was already standing to greet the man.

"Severus," said Dumbledore quickly.

"Headmaster," whispered Snape. "I just heard..." Snape stopped talking as his gaze fell on Harry. He drew his wand quickly, just as four more figures ran into the room.

"Why isn't this impostor restrained?" Snape spat quickly, pointing his wand between Harry's eyes. For his part, Harry simply sat there and continued to eat his sandwich.

"Severus, he is not-" Dumbledore began, but was cut off as another voice joined the throng.

"YOU!" shouted a female voice, and Harry looked past Snape to see a girl standing there. She had long, wavy red hair and looked to be about fifteen, maybe fourteen, her eyes were hazel and Harry caught his breath at the sight of her. *This could only be...* "WHO ARE YOU?" screamed the girl, her own wand now drawn on him.

"Melissa," cried a third voice, Lily Potter. She ran forward and grasped her daughter's arm, lowering the wand, all the while staring at Harry with tears of fear and confusion in her eyes.

"If everyone-" Dumbledore tried again, but this time another child ran ahead.

"YOU'RE MAKING MUM CRY!" screamed this young boy, who had scruffy red hair and blue eyes, but the resemblance was unmistakable. He raised another wand at Harry, who had finally put

down his chicken sandwich. "WHO ARE YOU? EVERYONE IS CRYING AND ARGUING BECAUSE OF YOU!"

"Michael!" shouted James Potter, the final person to enter the infirmary. "Lower that wand."

"NO! Keep it raised, boy," spat Snape, never taking his gaze from Harry. "He could be a Death Eater!"

"Shut up, Snape," offered James as Harry stood, staring at each person in the room individually. "He's not-"

"All of you," began Dumbledore softly, but with an unmistakable air of annoyance in his voice. "Calm down."

Snape ignored Dumbledore and took a step closer to Harry, who was watching them all with what looked like a glint of amusement in his eyes. "Who are you?" Snape said, and everyone in the room fell silent.

Harry looked deep into Snape's eyes and scowled. *Some things obviously never change...* He then looked down to the tip of the wand in the potion master's hand. "Don't you," Harry began with a hard, powerful edge to his voice that all in the room took notice of, "point a wand at me!"

"I..." Snape began, but hesitated when he felt the raw power emanating from the boy in front of him. He took a wise step back, but didn't lower his wand.

Taking a deep breath, Harry turned to the young girl and boy who had run into the room. "You two," he began carefully, slowly, and with a shake to his voice. "Melissa and Michael was it?" They both nodded. "My name is Harry," he continued and then smiled. "You can lower your wand, Michael."

Michael seemed to hesitate for a moment, and Harry could see the conflicting emotions in his eyes. After a moment though, he lowered his wand. "You're my brother, Harry?" questioned Michael. "I only just remember you."

Harry sighed and shook his head ever so slightly. "I -er-"

"Harry," whispered a small voice and Harry looked up into the eyes of his mother. Into the emerald green eyes of Lily Potter. "Are you..."

The next few seconds were like a dream to Harry, as Lily Potter took a few nervous steps towards him and around the table he stood behind. A thousand and one conflicting emotions surged through him quickly and Harry took a deep shuddering breath as he watched Lily bring her hand slowly up to his face.

He could see the emotion in her eyes as, after a long moment where everyone in the room held their breath, Lily slowly touched Harry's right cheek with her hand. At first Harry shied away from her touch, and his eyes instantly filled with fifteen years worth of tears. But after a moment he relented, and leaned forward a little.

"You are real..." whispered Lily. "You are Harry Potter."

"I am," whispered Harry. "I am..."

Harry didn't notice it, but James Potter had moved over to him as well, and it wasn't until he turned to meet those hazel eyes that he let a single tear fall from his own eye. *Oh God...* he thought. *Is this real?*

It felt as if days were compressed into a single second, and Harry didn't remember it happening, but soon his mother's arms were around him and she was crying into his shoulder, which hurt him slightly but he could handle the pain. James placed a comforting arm on both his wife's and son's back and began to cry himself.

Dumbledore smiled slightly and motioned for Snape to finally lower his wand. Melissa and Michael stood uncertainly to his left as they watched their parents and... brother... cry tears of happiness. There had been a lot of tears shed in grief and sorrow in the short years of their lives, it was foreign to them to see such ones of joy and happiness.

After two long minutes, the three of them finally separated and Harry wiped his eyes. "How is this possible?" whispered Lily a moment later,

looking at Harry and holding his arms tightly as if he could disappear at any moment.

"It's magic," said James simply, wiping his own eyes.

Harry smiled and sniffed slightly. "You should know," he began, "that I'm..."

"Not from this world," James finished. "We know, Harry, we know."

Harry frowned. "And I'm not really your..."

Lily's eyes turned serious for a moment, she swallowed and took a deep breath. "You are Harry Potter," she said strongly. "You are our son. Even if you're from another world, you're still our son."

Harry smiled. It was only a small smile, but it was filled with hope. He turned to his father, to James Potter.

James wasn't sure if he was dreaming. He had spent so many years mourning his murdered son, mourning Harry Potter. But there he was in front of him, standing tall with battle scars and an infinite sadness in his eyes. Which were so familiar to Lily's and yet profoundly different. Harry's eyes seemed haunted, dead even.

"I know we're not exactly your real parents, Harry," James whispered. "And I'm sure the James and Lily Potter in your world are worried about you, but we would really like to get to know you better."

Lily nodded and Harry let fall another tear at what his father had said. "Losing you," Lily said, "losing our Harry, it must have made us different to the parents you know," she continued, "but we'll do our best to make you welcome... for however long you're here."

Harry didn't think he could handle explaining the terrible events that had occurred in his world, the events that had claimed the lives of the parents he should have had. "Thank you," he whispered.

Lily laughed through her tears and slowly brushed Harry's hair away from his forehead, and in so doing revealed the lightning bolt shaped

scar. "How did you get this?" she asked quietly, and raised her hand to touch it.

Harry stepped back quickly and grabbed her wrist. He shuddered and let her go a moment later. "Sorry," he whispered quickly. "I don't like people touching that scar."

Lily nodded and enveloped Harry in another hug. "That's a curse scar though, isn't it?" she asked.

Harry nodded and covered it up again with his fringe. As he did so, Michael moved up to stand quietly behind his father and Melissa had moved closer as well, standing on the other side of the wooden table. Harry noticed briefly that Dumbledore was having whispered conversation with Snape at the entrance to the infirmary.

"Hello, Harry," whispered Michael from behind his father.

Harry looked down to him and smiled slightly. "Hi," he replied. "Nice to meet you."

Michael smiled as well and stepped out from behind James, who was frowning in thought now. "Nice to meet you...." James repeated Harry under his breath. "Isn't Michael your brother in your world, Harry?" he asked with concern.

Harry looked back up to his father and then to the other three members of his... *family*.

"No..." he began slowly. "My parents... you were unable to have any more children after me," he answered evasively.

Lily and James nodded, as Harry turned to look at Melissa across the table. "Hello," he said quietly.

Melissa stared at Harry for a good minute before her lips turned upwards in the faintest hint of a smile. "Hi, Harry," she said quietly. "Em... how are you?"

Harry truly laughed for the first time since arriving in this world. "Well I've been better," he smiled, flexing his shoulder and wincing at the jolt of pain that shot through it.

"Melissa was the one that found you two mornings ago," Lily said, dabbing at the tears in here eyes. "She levitated you up here."

Harry nodded. "I... think I remember," he said, struggling to recall his first memories outside of the Stream. "In any case, thank you," he replied sincerely to Melissa.

Lily smiled as all her children bonded again after they had been ripped apart six years ago. It was good to see them all laughing and smiling sincerely. She watched James scruff up Harry's hair and saw the happiness in her eldest son's eyes as this happened. Her gaze once again fell on that scar cut into his skin between his fringe though, and her happiness turned into concern.

From what little Lily knew of curse scars, she knew that a scar like that could only be caused by a serious dark curse, and none came to mind that could create scars such as that. She sensed, as only a mother could, that Harry was hiding deep, and terrible secrets in his past, and that it all came back to that scar. She bit her lip and hugged him again, but she knew better than to push him too far right now about that scar.

*If he has secrets she thought, he must have reasons.*

Harry smiled and accepted another hug from his mother. It felt so good, so needed. He couldn't believe it was happening. He kept expecting to wake up at any moment and find that he had been dreaming, and his real reality was a lot crueller. But it didn't happen, and this world felt real, if a little unfamiliar.

Still though, all of this seemed unbelievable. It was happening, his family was right there, real, alive, warm and accepting, but he was having a hard time realising the enormity of what had actually happened.

*It was as impossible... as...* he thought, but couldn't think of anything as most of the impossible things he could think of had already

happened. "I don't know how long I'm going to be here," he said slowly. "I... just don't... I'm?"

"Its okay, Harry," managed James. "We'll figure everything out."

### Chapter 3 - You Can Never Run Fast Enough

*Adversity is like a strong wind. It tears away from us all but the things that cannot be torn, so that we see ourselves as we really are.*

*~~ Arthur Golden*

"I don't trust him," Melissa stated flatly.

"Why not?" asked Michael.

It had been three days since Harry had arrived, and Lily, Michael and Melissa were sitting at their table in the staff quarters, still reeling from the blow of what had happened.

"He's given us no reason to," Melissa replied.

"But also no reason not to," Lily pointed out quietly.

Melissa frowned and folded her arms over her chest. "The fact that he is here at all is a reason not to trust him. Harry is dead."

Lily cringed and for a long moment fell silent, thinking of the devastating event six years ago that had taken Harry from them. "It's complicated, dear," she began. "He *is* Harry. My son, Lily Potter's son."

Melissa sighed as Michael transfigured a paperclip into a goblet. "I did it," he smiled happily.

"Where is he now anyway?" asked Melissa. "I've not seen him today."

Lily stood up and began slowly pacing the room. "Your father and the headmaster are talking to him now, about the need for secrecy."

"Secrecy?" asked Michael, his brow furrowing in confusion.

Lily walked over to her son and sat down next to him, looking at both her children before speaking. "Listen to me carefully," she said strictly. "No one, absolutely no one, can know the truth about Harry."



"But the school is already talking about it," Melissa argued. "What difference does it make now?"

Lily looked deep into her daughter's eyes. "It's only rumours at this point," she began, "and it has to stay that way. Voldemort will come if he learns that Harry Potter is alive."

Both Michael and Melissa shivered with justified fright. "Why would You-Know-Who want Harry?" whispered Michael.

Lily bit her bottom lip, and stared out of the open window and into the clear spring sky. She could see hundreds of Hogwarts students playing out on the grounds, dozing by the lake or under trees on this lazy Sunday afternoon. "He doesn't need a reason anymore," Lily answered sadly. "Our Harry is dead, and this Harry isn't. We need to keep that from him for as long as we can."

"You're not telling us something," Melissa frowned and took a sip of juice from the glass in front of her. "You never told us why You-Know-Who killed our Harry."

A shadow of fear and pain crossed painfully over Lily's face and she pressed her hand against the cool glass of the castle window. "It's safer for you not to know," she eventually said.

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"Don't push me," Harry said angrily under his breath. "I don't need protection, Dumbledore."

"I beg to differ, Harry. If Voldemort discovers you are alive, he will use all his available resources to see that you cease to be."

James opened his mouth to speak but Harry beat him to it. "How long have you been fighting this war?" he asked.

Dumbledore blinked. "Decades..." he answered quietly.

"And how powerful is Voldemort?"

"I think you should know," stated Dumbledore, but continued when he saw the persistent look on Harry's face. "He has, at our best estimate, five hundred Death Eaters under his command, many in high places of power."

"Infested in the Ministry like rats," spat James.

Harry glanced at him but then turned back to Dumbledore, as Fawkes sang softly on his perch and the dozens of previous headmaster's in their portraits watched with interest. "Who is the Minister of Magic?" he asked.

"Bartemius Crouch," the wizened headmaster replied. "Has been for the past fourteen years."

"Senior or junior?" Harry asked quickly.

"Senior," answered James. "Why would it matter?"

Harry smiled grimly. "Because in my world, Bartemius Crouch Junior was a Death Eater."

Dumbledore's face darkened and he glanced quickly at James. "We had suspected him," Dumbledore began slowly. "But how did you discover it, Harry?"

Harry laced his hands together and rotated his shoulder slowly, wincing at the now familiar pain. "Old Barty kind of gave it away when he tried to kill me back in fourth year," he shrugged carelessly. "Feel's like that happened in another lifetime now..."

An uncomfortable silence fell over the study and Harry rubbed his tired eyes. He didn't miss the worried glance that Dumbledore and James shared, but he chose to ignore it. "Getting back to the blood protection, Harry-" James began.

"NO!" Harry shouted quickly, looking at Dumbledore. "I'm sorry, sir," he said. "But I will never trust any protection you claim you can give me again."

"Harry..." whispered James as Dumbledore opened his mouth to protest.

"In my world," Harry continued, "people died because your blood magic failed. I can't and won't accept your protection, Dumbledore."

Dumbledore paled considerably and James inwardly gasped. "Harry, this is not open for discussion. Voldemort *will* kill you without it."

James expected Harry to shiver, or even pale at that statement. What he didn't expect was that Harry would merely laugh. "Voldemort will *try* to kill me," Harry corrected. "He won't succeed."

Dumbledore sat up straighter in his chair. "What makes you so confident?" he asked.

Harry sighed. "Voice of experience..." he whispered. "Anyway, do you know where Voldemort is in this world?"

Dumbledore surveyed Harry with a critical eye for a moment, before finally looking away. "His location is unknown to us. We believe him to be based in one of the lost castles that belonged to Salazar Slytherin."

"How come you don't know for sure?"

Dumbledore shook his head with regret. "These castles can only be accessed by the heir of Slytherin," he began. "And Voldemort acts as a secret keeper for his main castle. It is truly hidden and invisible to us."

"But he has the ability to attack you anywhere, Harry!" stressed James. "Even Hogwarts... you need Albus's protection."

Harry looked at his father sharply. "Never..." he whispered dangerously, "never!"

And with that said, Harry jumped up out of his chair and fled from the headmaster's study. He had only one destination in mind, and set off in the direction of the Astronomy tower.

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### *The Fortress of Salazar Slytherin*

In the north of Scotland, up past Edinburgh and Glasgow, lies a quiet and fairly unnoticed range of mountains and valleys that is known as Glencoe. Also known as *Gleann Comhann* in Gaelic, it is one of the largest ranges in the United Kingdom.

Glencoe is home to some of the most breathtaking scenery on the planet. It is responsible for a few of the many great poets, songwriters, and artists of our time. It is truly a beautiful place, and few other places could claim to contain such a large variety of landforms and flora.

*But Glencoe holds a secret that would terrify most people to their very soul.*

Infested, imbedded like a tick, buried in one of the many hidden valleys at Glencoe lies the largest and most ancient castle of the Dark Lord Salazar Slytherin. For centuries it lay undisturbed in its darkness, hidden in plain sight but only visible to the true heir. Light bends away from this castle and it is, in fact, the most evil and deadly structure ever built upon the Earth.

Thousands of Muggle repelling charms, ancient magic's, wards and Fidelius charms keep this castle hidden to all, save one. If you were able to see it though, you wouldn't want to. The castle itself was nothing more than a long, tall spike that was only one hundred metres wide and that rose to a height of a half a kilometre. It was a simple, cylindrical structure that was completely black right down to the spurs that jutted out on the top of the castle, forming a platform that was complete with hideous, deformed gargoyles that inspired fear on their own.

But this spike on the earth was only the tip of the fortress Slytherin had created. Buried deep underneath the valley, reaching up into the sides of the nearby mountains and under one of the lochs, stretched miles upon miles of tunnels and secret halls. Rooms and supply stores that could hide and house an army indefinitely. It was the

greatest strategic system of tunnels on the planet, and it was in the control of a madman.

Unspeakable evil resides in this underground fortress that is a veritable maze of destruction and hate. Down in one of its deepest caverns, is rumoured to be dozens if not hundreds of Basilisks, thriving in their own community, just waiting for their Master's call. Dementors roam the caverns and halls, surviving off of the despair the very walls seem to hold, gathered from years of torture and death of the innocent. Chimaeras lay magically dormant in another deep cavern, again just waiting for the true heir to revive them.

Also, the largest colony of Erumpent's reside deep within the mountain. This huge magical beast, native to Africa, resembles a rhinoceros. Its horn, which can pierce almost anything, contains a fluid which explodes, destroying whatever it hits. And finally, the last magical creature that poses any real threat in this fortress is the Lethifold. A creature that resembles a half inch thick black cloak, which can move along any dark surface. The pitch black walls underneath the serenity of Glencoe are the perfect hiding place for this beast, whose very name means *death*.

And every one of these dangerous magical beasts, the worst on the planet, the proof that the universe we live in is without question a cruel place, is under the control of the Heir of Slytherin. Magic almost beyond comprehension binds these creatures to the Dark Lord Voldemort, so that they are at his command. And, if left unchallenged, are simply waiting for the order to strike.

Voldemort himself lives in this castle; he had done for the past decade. He and his five hundred or so marked servants were protected against its evil, its monsters, and its magical traps so long as they swore unwavering loyalty, and received the Dark Mark as rightful passage through the miles upon miles of treacherous halls.

Voldemort hardly ever descended into the lower levels of his fortress anymore, having long since discovered most of its secrets. No, he ruled this place from a dark throne situated in the spike that was the only part of the castle above ground. And even with all of the

monsters and magical horror that the earth under Glencoe held, this made the spherical point the evilest part of the land.

*Those who called Azkaban Hell on Earth did not know of the nightmares the Fortress of Slytherin could unleash.*

"Lucius..." hissed a cold voice in the darkness of the throne room, on the highest floor in the spike. "The summons is not scheduled until midnight. This had better be important..."

Lucius Malfoy, despite his years of loyal service, shivered at the threat in his master's voice. He knew without a doubt that he would be punished if his information was inaccurate. "It is of great importance, my Lord," he said quickly, not once looking up at the Dark Lord from his position on the cold marble floor.

Voldemort waited a moment, lightly fingering his wand, tossing it lazily from hand to hand. "Well?" he said impatiently.

Lucius shivered. "My son sent me an owl two hours ago, Master. It seems that Hogwarts is playing host to a strange boy."

Voldemort's red eyes blazed with fury. "And why would this interest me, Lucius?" The Cruciatus curse was already on the tip of his tongue.

Lucius took a deep breath before continuing. "My Lord, the boy is rumoured to be Harry Potter."

*The very fortress and the surrounding land shook as the evil in the magic sensed the Dark Lord's awesome fury.*

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Harry climbed the familiar stairs of the Astronomy Tower slowly, conflicting emotions surging through his mind. The most prominent one was loss. He had lost his world and, unless he was wrong, would not be able to return to it for one year.

*A lot can happen in a year* he thought. *And Voldemort took some of my pure magic when I survived Avada Kedavra again. He'll be stronger than even Dumbledore now.*

Harry ran a frustrated hand through his already dishevelled hair. *Although it did nearly kill him. He could be out of it for several months... or maybe...* Harry sighed; there were just too many possibilities.

Warm, spring sunlight greeted him up on the top of the Astronomy Tower, and Harry rose with a purpose. He was going to see if he could return to his world. *To Hell with secrecy!*

Walking out onto the large viewing balcony, Harry saw that he wasn't alone. Padma Patil and Luna Lovegood sat on the familiar bench that was in the same place in his world. Harry inwardly smiled. He had kissed Padma Patil in that very place last year.

"Don't mind me," he said, as their shocked gazes met his own. Without another word, Harry stepped up onto the raised wall and looked out at the vastness of the world around him. He felt no fear as he looked down to the vast drop beneath him, and his eyes swept up and over to the village of Hogsmeade, the forbidden forest, and the familiar mountain in the distance that guarded over the wizard cemetery.

Harry took a deep breath and rubbed his hands together, as the wind blew his hair and clothes around him. *Okay* he thought. *This is it...*

Harry raised both his palms to the sky, his right one a little lower as he still didn't have full manoeuvrability in that shoulder. Closing his eyes, Harry said the three words that had changed his life forever.

***"TEMPUS AC CAPACITAS!"***

It was a spell capable of tearing a hole into the Stream that separated universes. A spell that held consequences beyond Harry's understanding. It was a spell that... didn't work.

Harry felt the power surge through his arms and his eyes flew open as untamed magic shot out of his palms. White hot light streamed

away into the air and exploded like fireworks, raining down harmless drops of white light like snowflakes. Harry himself was thrown back off the wall and landed hard on the ground, wincing in pain as his shoulder and leg protested to this event.

"GOD DAMN IT!" he cried, standing up and glaring murderously at the falling white light. He noticed out of the corner of his eye that Luna and Padma were looking at him fearfully, and Harry took a deep breath to calm himself down. "Sorry..." he whispered, looking briefly at the two people he knew well, but they didn't even recognise him.

Even though Harry was doing his best to keep his anger in check, he could not stop the cold and unforgiving feeling of despair that grasped his heart in its icy grip. *He was not going home.*

The magic he barely understood was useless. The Vernal Equinox was the key to it all, and that was a year away. Harry collapsed to his knees as the hopelessness of the situation threatened to engulf him in its entirety. But he was not through yet. Sighing heavily at the unfairness of the world, Harry calmed himself and reached deep inside for the strength to carry on.

He knew he possessed a will to live stronger than most, but he just needed to remind himself how far he had come since his eleventh birthday. Learning about the Wizarding world, attending Hogwarts, destroying enemies, re-writing the rule books countless times, losing loved ones... fighting, for a better future.

Harry stood up.

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"What do you mean he's gone?" Lily whispered.

"Just that, Lily," James said just as quietly. "He ran, and we can't find him."

"Is anybody looking for him?" Melissa asked.

Dumbledore strode forward and joined the small family at the table in their quarters. The siren had just gone that signalled the end of the



morning lessons, and the beginning of lunch. He would be needed in the Great Hall for a few minutes soon. "No," he answered Melissa. "I do not think it best we push this boy too hard. He may not bounce back."

"What?" Lily said quickly, holding Michael close to her.

James sighed. "You must have seen it," he said sadly. "That look in his eyes... the black rings underneath them. His eyes radiate pain when certain topics are discussed. I don't think he has had an easy life..."

"It's true," Michael said surprisingly. "I couldn't meet his gaze for long. It just... hurt so much. I felt sorry for him, and I didn't even know why."

Everyone in the room fell silent for a moment at Michael's words. Reflecting on what they already knew of Harry, which wasn't much. "He hasn't been totally honest," James said after a time, "but I don't think he has lied to us."

"That remains to be seen," Dumbledore replied. "Whatever he is hiding, and I do believe he is hiding something, it is not a happy memory. He may not want *us* to know."

Lily, who had remained silent the last few minutes, spoke. "I've... I've seen our Harry in him," she said slowly. "He is older than the Harry we knew, but a part of him is the same. I just want to know how he survived Voldemort! What mistakes did we make that his parents in his world didn't?"

James moved around the table and placed his hands softly on Lily's shoulders. "I'll say it again," he whispered. "He has not had an easy life. All the scars he has are enough of a claim to that! We should just let him tell us in his own time..."

"But what if he never tells us?" Lily argued.

"It is his right not to," Dumbledore said. "But I do not think he will keep his past hidden. We must remember though, our world may be vastly different from his own. He has already seen someone who died in his world."

"Who?" Lily and James asked quickly, their eyes widening.

Dumbledore sighed. "Sirius," he whispered.

James' jaw dropped and just hung there for a moment in shock. "But... but Sirius is one of the strongest fighters on our side. It would have had to have been Voldemort who killed him."

Dumbledore shrugged. "Harry did not go into any details. Sirius ran into my study as I was talking to Harry. The look on his face said all it needed to. Sirius did not die fairly."

"He would have still had us," Lily whispered. "The James and Lily Potter in his world would have done everything they could have to make sure he was safe."

"But do we know that?" asked James. "How do we know that we-"

"-Are not dead in my world," a voice across the room said.

Lily, James, Dumbledore, Michael and Melissa all looked up sharply, in surprise, to see Harry leaning in the doorway against the frame. His eyes were radiating that look of pain, as they swept across everyone in the room.

"Harry..." Lily managed.

Harry looked down and took a deep breath, then he took three quick steps into the room, and over to the table. He met his mother's gaze. "You are dead," he said quietly and Lily gasped, raising a hand to her mouth. "Before I came here, I only knew Dumbledore," he nodded to the ancient headmaster. "You died," he managed, looking once again at James and Lily, "the night I received this." Harry lifted his fringe partially to reveal his scar.

Before Harry even realised what had happened, Lily had stood up and enveloped him in a deep hug that he didn't know how to respond to. He just stood there in surprise as she cried into his shoulder once again. It was all foreign to him, Harry didn't really understand it. He looked to his father for help.

James understood instantly and carefully pulled Lily off of Harry, and sat her back down in her chair. She was still crying quietly as her gaze pierced Harry's again. Harry sighed; he knew this wouldn't be easy. "This scar," he continued.

"Is a curse scar," said Dumbledore, as Melissa and Michael stared at his forehead.

Harry nodded. "I received it Halloween night, 1981, if that date has any significance to you?"

"It does," James nodded. "Voldemort came to our home in Godric's Hollow."

"Yes..." Harry urged.

"And Peter, rest his soul," continued Lily with a shake to her voice. "Warned us he'd told Voldemort, giving us a chance to escape. It cost him his life."

It took Harry a moment to process that one. "Pettigrew... warned you?" he gasped.

Lily and James nodded, but Harry's eyes darkened further. "I wonder why?" he eventually said quietly.

"He didn't in your world," James stated. "And we died that night."

Harry nodded. "I survived because of your sacrifice," he turned to Lily. "Voldemort killed you, as you were trying to protect me," he whispered.

"How did I die?" asked James.

"You duelled him until death," Harry replied. "Trying to give my mother and me a chance to escape. We didn't..."

An uncomfortable silence fell over the small group, until, "How did you survive?" asked Michael, voicing what they were all thinking.

Harry turned to him. *He's quick* he thought, looking at what could have been his brother. "As I said, sacrifice. When you died," he turned back to Lily. "You offered yourself in my place. It was all for that damn prophecy though," Harry spat and his eyes sparkled dangerously. "And Voldemort killed you to reach me..."

"And?" pressed Dumbledore anxiously.

"And that was his first mistake," Harry smiled. "Because of the sacrifice, I was protected against his magic. He tried to kill me, *Avada Kedavra*, but when the curse hit me," All of them gasped. "It bounced right back at Voldemort, and tore him from his body."

"You survived the Killing Curse..." whispered James. "That is impossible."

Harry shrugged. "It wasn't through choice, and some good did come of it. Voldemort was partially destroyed. He was weakened for thirteen years, and the world knew peace."

"You fulfilled the prophecy," Lily said silently.

Harry smiled sadly and shook his head, leaning against the table. "Not quite. Voldemort was resurrected during my fourth year. He used my blood... the blood of an equal. It wasn't pretty... I- I won't say more than that."

"Where did you grow up, Harry?" asked Dumbledore. "With Sirius?"

Harry laughed harshly. "Oh no, Dumbledore," he said, angrier than he had originally intended. "You sent me to live with my mother's sister, Petunia."

Lily gasped again and James paled. He knew what those *people* thought of magic. James frowned though. "But why didn't..."

"Sirius take me?" Harry raised his eyebrows and James nodded. "He was in Azkaban, believed guilty of killing Pettigrew and half a dozen Muggles."

"He would never-" began James hotly.

"He didn't," Harry stressed. "It was Pettigrew... again. Sirius went after him once he found out you were dead. He cornered him and Pettigrew panicked, destroyed half the street and escaped as a rat. Sirius was found there, partially insane, and dragged off to Azkaban without a trial, courtesy of the Wizengamot."

"Without a trial?" Dumbledore echoed.

Harry nodded. "Voldemort had just been defeated. Death Eaters were being rounded up and sent to Azkaban. Mistakes were made.... and everyone thought Sirius was the secret keeper."

"Didn't Sirius put up any sort of fight?" asked James.

"He escaped Azkaban after spending twelve years with the Dementors, and was on the run for two years. I spoke with him from time to time, learnt the truth. But he died... at the end of my fifth year."

James was afraid to ask, but Lily wasn't. "How?" she asked.

"He was duelling Bellatrix Lestrange in the Department of Mysteries, she knocked him back through a veil that..."

"The Veil..." whispered Dumbledore. "He fell through the Veil..."

Harry nodded. "Would have died instantly."

Silence fell on the group once again, and Harry pulled a chair out from under the table and sat down, looking to each of the faces in the room as he did. "So... apart from a few scrapes here and there," he said. "That's my life up to this point."

"And we have to hide you from Voldemort," Dumbledore said quickly. "There can be no arguments, Harry, you need protecting."

Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair. A thousand thoughts swirled in the storm that his mind had become. *What to do?* he wondered. *Where can I go? I'm stuck here for now. I won't hide, no... I'll fight again. For however long I'm here I'll do what I can!*

"I'm not hiding," he said calmly, talking to none of them in particular. He was just trying to reassure himself.

"Our world is a lot different to yours, Harry," Lily said and James nodded in agreement. "Death Eaters are everywhere."

Harry shook his head. "Then our worlds aren't so different."

"Take the protection, Harry," James urged. "Run, hide from Voldemort."

"From him..." Harry shrugged carelessly. "I could never run fast enough. No, I have to fight."

"Fight V-Voldemort," whispered Melissa. "You'll die."

Harry sighed again, for what felt like the hundredth time that day. He looked to all the faces in his room, to Dumbledore and through what could have been his family if the fates had allowed. His gaze finally fell on the soft wood of the table in front of him. When he spoke, he did so softly;

"For a brief moment yesterday," he began, "I thought I could rest here for awhile. But that doesn't look like its going to happen. From what I've seen and assumed, would I be right to say that Voldemort is slowly beating you down?"

Dumbledore stared deep into Harry's eyes for a moment before answering. "We are losing hope," he managed after a moment. "He has beaten us back into a corner. The Ministry is barely functioning, many are joining him out of fear, and other nations are refusing to help. We are not winning this war."

Harry nodded. "Well I like to think I ended up in this world for a reason," he said. "I'm going to fight. I'm going to openly challenge Voldemort, show this world that it can be done. That he is not as untouchable as he appears."

"No you're not," Lily said quickly. "You're just a boy, Harry. He will kill you. I don't think you understand just how powerful he is."

Harry's face turned dark. "I know how powerful he is. I know Voldemort better than anyone, in either of our worlds. I know the risks, and I know the odds. I'm a shining example that they can be beat. Whatever he'd have you believe, he isn't immortal."

Pure pain and wisdom shone from Harry's eyes like a beacon, and all in the room couldn't help but be heartened by this boy's words. It was what they wanted to hear. Despite the danger, they found themselves wishing that what Harry had said could be realised, but it was an impossible goal.

"There is no reason for you to die," James argued. "Go home, Harry. Return to your own world."

Harry shrugged. "Can't," he answered. "Already tried. I think I'm stuck here for at least a year, maybe six months."

"That is why you must be protected. You're too young to fight in a war, Harry," Dumbledore persisted.

Harry shook his head. "No," he said, "I'm not. I've been fighting all my life. I don't know how to do anything else. Give me a fight and I'll do my best."

"You shouldn't have to fight, Harry," James whispered. "But I suppose it makes sense."

"James!" cried Lily.

James walked around the table and looked Harry straight in the eye. "Promise us you won't die, Harry," he said.

"I can't," Harry replied instantly. "I can't promise that."

James had expected that. "Then... promise us you'll never give up."

Harry stood as well now. "That I can promise," he whispered.

Dumbledore watched this interaction gravely. For once, he was unsure of what to do. "Do you fully understand the path you are about to walk, Harry. No one can defy Voldemort openly and expect to live.

That is the sad truth, he has grown more powerful than we ever could have imagined."

"He is in for a bit of a surprise then," smiled Harry. "I am quite powerful myself."

"You don't even have a wand," Melissa stated. "How can you fight if you don't have a weapon?"

Harry opened his mouth to speak but Lily beat him to it. "We have a wand," she said quietly, standing and walking through a door and into another room. It took her a minute to find what she was looking for, and then she returned. "This belonged to our Harry. He never got to use it though."

Harry watched as Lily opened a small black, dusty box and removed a long, familiar piece of wood. "Eleven inches," Lily began. "Holly..."

"and Phoenix feather," Harry finished. "That used to be my wand."

Lily bit her bottom lip as James, Dumbledore, Michael and Melissa watched carefully. With a nod to reassure herself, Lily walked over to Harry and handed him the wand.

Harry felt it instantly. The familiar, warm tingling sensation at the tips of his fingers that was his wand. He hadn't felt it in months, ever since the power of two dozen blasting curses had destroyed his original wand. But, he realised, this was his original wand. It was Voldemort's brother, a sign of his awesome link to the Dark Lord. He had his wand back.

"Thank you," he whispered, twirling the wand between his fingers.

"We hope it brings you more luck than it did our Harry," Lily said.

Harry nodded and then, with a final look at it, pocketed the wand. It was then that he asked a question that had been bothering him. "How did I die?" he asked.

The silence in the room was deafening, and the look on each and every face was heartbreaking. Eventually, Melissa spoke. "Our



Harry," she began, "wasn't as lucky at surviving the killing curse as you were."

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*Later that night*

Severus Snape collapsed in a heap on the bed in his quarters. He cast aside his black Death Eater robes and breathed in deeply, pushing the after effects of the Cruciatus curse to the back of his mind. *It had been a hard summons* he thought, drinking a potion that numbed the pain.

*"Tell me Severus," hissed the Dark Lord. "Are the rumours true? Has Harry Potter returned?"*

*"He has, my Lord," answered Snape instantly, doing exactly as Dumbledore had told him to do. "Harry Potter is alive and at Hogwarts."*

*Voldemort shook with fury, but he hid it well. "Interesting..." he muttered. "I killed that boy, Severus. What do you know of this?"*

*"Nothing, my Lord," Snape answered. "I believed the boy to be dead as well. If Dumbledore knows what is happening, he has not confided in me."*

*"Are you sure, Severus?" hissed Voldemort.*

*"Of course, my Lord. I would never-"*

*"Lie, Severus? I believe you are."*

*"NO! I-"*

*"Crucio!"*

Snape snapped out of his memories and drank the rest of his potion. Voldemort knew the truth though, Harry Potter was alive, and had become a priority target.

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*The next morning*

"It created a link between us," said Harry, rubbing his scar.

They were once again in Dumbledore's office, the calm soft song of the phoenix alleviating some of their pains and personal demons.

"I am not sure I understand," Dumbledore frowned.

"A link," Harry repeated. "I didn't feel anything in my scar until I started to attend Hogwarts. But whenever Voldemort was close, I could feel it in my scar. It burnt viciously."

"And after he was resurrected?"

"He used my blood," Harry whispered painfully. "It forged a greater link between us. I could sometimes see through his eyes, he could possess me and I could feel his emotions."

"Interesting," mused Dumbledore. "And how did you deal with this?"

Harry shrugged. "As well as I could. Just carried on I guess. Hoping for a better tomorrow...."

Dumbledore was silent for a moment. "Do you feel the connection in our world?"

Harry shook his head. "No. I haven't felt anything. He isn't the Voldemort I know though. We haven't had the same history, so I doubt we would be connected."

"I agree," Dumbledore nodded. "Now, onto lighter topics," he continued with a small smile. "Your magical education, Harry. I believe you should be in sixth year, is that correct?"

"It is."

"Would you like to continue it here at our Hogwarts?" asked Dumbledore. "You are, of course, more than welcome."

Harry frowned. "Return to Hogwarts?" he said warily. "I... suppose I could. I did want to find out how my friends are doing in this world."

"And since you are against the blood magic protection," the headmaster continued. "The Hogwarts wards will be the best protection for you."

Harry nodded and looked out of the open window and into the clear sky. "But if I stay, it will bring Voldemort here. I don't want to be responsible for anymore deaths."

Dumbledore sighed and his eyes darkened. "I fear Tom will attack this castle soon, whether or not you are here. It is a continued defiance to his power, and to remove us will shatter the world."

"Then I will stay," Harry said quickly. "If he is coming then I'll be here."

Dumbledore nodded gravely. "Then how would you like to go get sorted over breakfast. If you really want to challenge Voldemort, to show him you exist. Then I can think of no better way than announcing it in the morning notices."

Harry stood up and fingered the wand in his pocket. "I was already sorted into Gryffindor," he said.

"Perhaps you've changed since then," Dumbledore pondered. "Perhaps you're more of a Slytherin, or a Hufflepuff."

Harry shrugged. "We'll see," he said as Dumbledore removed the sorting hat from one of the shelves lining his study, and the two of them headed down to the Great Hall in silence.

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Eight hundred students were eating breakfast in the Great Hall as Dumbledore and a mysterious boy entered. Eight hundred students and a dozen or so professors. The number of students had been steadily declining for ten years, what with families being cut down on a weekly basis. Hogwarts was not as full as it could have been.

*There may not be as many people as there should be* thought Harry, as he and Dumbledore walked down and in between two of the four house tables. *But the whispers are still the same!* As he walked, Harry heard the familiar whispers about him as they reached his ears.

They reached the end of the tables and Dumbledore motioned for Harry to sit down, before walking up in front of the school, and conjuring a small chair to place the sorting hat on. Harry sat down on the end of the Ravenclaw table, next to a small first year girl who stared at him in confusion. Harry ignored her, and scanned the Hall for any familiar faces.

He saw hundreds of them. People he had past dozens of times at Hogwarts, others he had barely known, and a few people he had known a lot better. Over at the Gryffindor table he saw Neville staring back at him, as were Seamus and Dean. Further down that table he saw his best friends. Ron was sitting with Hermione, and to Hermione's left sat... *Ginny*. Harry caught his breath but eventually turned away, Ginny didn't know him anymore.

"Good morning everyone," began Dumbledore from his position up in front of the staff table. "A few announcements before the day's lessons commence. The first, all Hogsmeade visits are still cancelled until further notice," There were many groans at this. "But on a lighter note, the Quidditch match between Ravenclaw and Slytherin has been given the go ahead for this weekend. That promises to be fun."

Harry stared at Dumbledore and was determined to ignore the whispers being passed around the Hall. Only a moment ago he had chanced a glance at the Slytherin table, and had seen Draco Malfoy's pointed face smirking back at him. Harry suppressed his urge to attack the blonde Slytherin, as he had almost killed Ginny, Ron and Hermione back in his world only ten days ago now.

"And I'm sure all of you have noticed the arrival of this young man," Dumbledore continued, waving his hand in Harry's direction. "As I am sure you have all noticed his remarkable resemblance to Professor Potter."

There were several nods of agreement around the Hall and Harry made ready for the renewed whispers.

"This is Professor Potter's eldest child, Harry Potter," Dumbledore said.

*There go the whispers* thought Harry.

Dumbledore carried on. "He has been in hiding for nearly six years, after an attempt on his life was made by Lord Voldemort." He paused here to allow the gasps and shrieks of terror to subside. "But now, we can finally welcome him to our school. Harry, if you will," the headmaster finished and picked up the sorting hat off the small stool. Harry stood and headed for it.

"I wonder why he so suddenly came out of hiding?" questioned Hermione, staring quizzically at this boy as he headed over to Dumbledore, and the sorting hat.

"I thought Professor Potter's eldest son was dead," Ron said. "I mean, mum told us about it, didn't she, Gin."

Ginny nodded. "I remember," she began. "But perhaps that was a lie so You-Know-Who would stop trying to kill him."

Ron shrugged. "I bet he'll be in Gryffindor though. Like the other Potters," he said, casting a glance at Michael and Melissa Potter, who were seated up near the head of the table.

"He does look a lot like Professor Potter though," Ginny said.

"Tall, dark and handsome," Hermione smiled appreciatively.

"Hey!" Ron cried. "You're not supposed to be looking at anyone else like that."

Hermione and Ginny laughed, and Hermione patted her boyfriend's arm. "Be quiet, Ron," she whispered. "He's about to be sorted."

Harry sat down on the stool and nodded to Dumbledore. The hat was dropped on his head, and despite his growth over the last few years, the hat was so stretched and patched in places that it still fell down over his eyes. He couldn't see a thing, nor could he hear anything.

It was a full half a minute before the hat finally spoke, and when it did it wasn't happy. "You do not belong here," the voice of the hat said in his ear.

Harry was surprised at first to hear it speak, but he recovered. "I know," he said. "But if you could just sort me, that would be great."

The hat grumbled and shifted itself on Harry's head. "Very well. Let's see here..." it said. "Well this is very interesting. A traveller from another world... duelled with Dark Lords, friends, and monsters... heir of a founder... slain a basilisk... destroyed Dementors... survived and overcame all three Unforgivable curses... and all before your seventeenth birthday. But where should I put you?"

"Gryffindor would be convenient," Harry told it.

"Gryffindor... hmm... You possess qualities that would suit all four houses. Bravery and courage... loyalty and understanding... intelligence and a thirst for knowledge... cunning and ambitious. I'll have to delve deeper for this one."

Harry felt a tingling sensation inside his skull, but before he could speak, the hat beat him to it. "Now this will be the decider," it began. "You're an expert in loss and death... a tireless fighter against the Darkness... you would willingly sacrifice yourself for an innocent life... you possess the ability to open a path that leads to another universe... Hmph! I believe you are the strongest wizard I have ever known."

"Thanks," Harry whispered. "But I'm still not sorted."

The hat shrugged... or folded itself in a way that resembled a shrug. "I hate to say it, but I believe I'm stumped. You could go anywhere, the choice is yours."

"Gryffindor," Harry said without any hesitation, immediately thinking of his friends.

"Ah! There it is," said the hat. "Friendship. I should have seen it earlier, I must be getting old. GRYFFINDOR!"

The hat was pulled from Harry's head and he was greeted with small applause and a few cheers from around the room. He smiled slightly, as his first sorting surfaced in his mind, and then walked slowly over to the Gryffindor table. He sat down at the end of the table, and for the first time since arriving in this strange world he felt at home.

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### *Slytherin Fortress*

"It has been confirmed, my Lord. This boy is Harry Potter."

"I killed Harry Potter," Voldemort hissed. "No one survives the killing curse. He is dead."

"Perhaps this is some trickery devised by Dumbledore?" offered Bellatrix Lestrange.

"No..." Voldemort whispered. "Dumbledore is a fool, but he is an honourable fool. He would not play games with me. This is something else."

"My Lord?" questioned Lucius Malfoy.

"I think the time has come," began Voldemort. "To remove the unworthy from Hogwarts. Bring me Salazar's texts on the destruction of his school's wards!"

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## Chapter 4 - Choices and Assertion

*Anyone can give up; it's the easiest thing in the world to do. But to hold it together when everyone would understand if you fell apart, that's true strength.*

~~Unknown

"See," smiled Ron. "I knew he would be a Gryffindor."

Hermione, Ron, and Ginny applauded and cheered with the rest of their house as Harry Potter took a seat at the end of their table. It took a moment for the school to quiet down, and then Dumbledore spoke a final time.

"Excellent," he smiled. "Harry, if we could please have a few words after breakfast..." Harry nodded. "Good. Now," continued Dumbledore. "The safety alarm is still in place, but the location has changed to this Great Hall. All students, if the alarm is sounded, are not to return to their common room, but to come here. Thank you."

Harry frowned. They had an alarm if anything happened. *Fifteen years of fighting a war could make a difference* he thought, grabbing a bacon roll and chewing it thoughtfully. As he ate, Harry listened to the sounds of the school around him and sighed. It was the same, but then again it was so different. He realised, after looking down the table, that Ron and Hermione were friends. *That's good*, he thought, *but I wonder how it happened.*

Ten minutes later and breakfast had ended and the day's lessons had begun. Harry hung back as the crowds filtered out through the doors and remained seated at the table, waiting for Dumbledore. Soon everyone had left, bar a few professors and Dumbledore himself.

"Hello," said Harry, as James Potter sat down next to him.

"Hi, Harry," his father responded, patting him on the back. "You decided to attend Hogwarts then."



Harry nodded. "If Voldemort's coming here, then here is where I need to be," he replied simply.

James sighed and rapped his knuckles on the table nervously. "How can you be so calm, Harry?" he asked. "Voldemort is so powerful."

Harry shrugged and took a sip of juice from his goblet. "I don't fear him," he said, placing the goblet back down. "Not anymore..."

"What changed you?" asked James.

Harry turned to look at his father, and sighed. "I realised..." he began slowly, "that I'm as powerful as he is, more so if I really try, and that I'm willing to use that power... for the greater good."

"Destroying him..." James whispered.

"Without doubt," Harry replied, laughing harshly as Dumbledore arrived from the staff table.

"Hello, James, Harry," he said. "I wonder if I could please speak to Harry alone," he asked, looking at James.

James nodded. "I have to get to my third years anyway," he said, putting a hand on Harry's shoulder briefly before leaving.

"Now, Harry," began Dumbledore, taking a seat at the Gryffindor table opposite him. "We need to discuss a few things."

Harry drained his goblet and sat patiently, waiting for the wizened headmaster to speak. "First, Harry," Dumbledore continued. "I believe it would be best if you kept your true past hidden."

"If I can, I will," Harry replied.

Dumbledore surveyed him over his familiar half moon spectacles. "Do try, Harry," he said and then continued. "I also wish to know how powerful you are," he asked. "I wish to know what makes you so confident in your abilities, that you feel you can challenge Voldemort."

Harry had known this question was coming, and he answered it with a thought. Using his rudimentary skills in thought magic, Harry levitated his plate and goblet, never once breaking his eye contact with Dumbledore, who looked mildly surprised at this display of power.

"Impressive," he said. "But Voldemort is capable of much more."

Harry shrugged and then nodded. With another thought, he transfigured the goblet into a statue of a long, dark snake. A second thought transfigured the floating plate into another statue, this one of a red and gold griffin. Smiling slightly, Harry had the griffin and snake attack each other.

Ten seconds later and the snake statue had been reduced to dust, as the griffin flew across the table above its kill. "Enough?" Harry asked lazily.

"More than enough," Dumbledore replied quietly, in a voice filled with concern. "That magic should be beyond you, Harry. It should be beyond anyone of only sixteen years..."

Harry laughed harshly. "Circumstances in my world... forced me to learn fast."

"Very well," nodded Dumbledore. "You will need some school supplies for today. Can you transfigure this," he said, placing a small piece of cloth on the table. "Into a useable black bag?"

Harry nodded and drew his wand. It felt strange using it again, but he wanted to keep his abilities with wandless magic a secret. And that meant he could tell no one. Secrets travelled fast at Hogwarts. "*Insura!*" Harry said, and a faint beam of yellow light shot from the end of his wand, and the small piece of cloth became a black bag that he could carry his supplies in.

"Excellent," smiled Dumbledore. "Now can you create some quills and ink?"

Harry frowned and raised his wand. He wasn't exactly sure how to do this. For ink he would need a liquid, and then he would have to

change its elements and consistency. Quills would require... hair maybe... or better yet a feather.

"Is something the matter?" asked Dumbledore.

Harry smiled and shook his head. "You know," he said quietly. "I've learnt a lot of magic over these last few months... and none of it would be much good in a time of peace." He stopped there for a minute and stared at the table before him. "I don't know how to work these normal charms."

"Understandable," replied Dumbledore, retrieving his own wand and transfiguring several objects around the table into school supplies. He levitated them into the bag Harry had made and handed it to him. "May I ask how you studied back in your world?" he asked as Harry reflected on his magical education.

"Hmm..?" Harry frowned as he snapped out of his memories. "Oh! I had a group of special trainers that taught me how to... fight. Taught me how to control magic and learn to fight hand to hand. I was at Hogwarts, but I wasn't taught the regular curriculum."

Dumbledore nodded. "Did I make that decision?" he asked.

"Sort of..." Harry shrugged. "You didn't really have a choice after Ethan was killed.... Oh... Oh dear."

"What is it?" the headmaster asked quickly.

Harry took a deep breath. "Does Voldemort have a son?" he asked quietly.

Dumbledore nodded. "He is rarely seen, and he is extremely powerful for a boy his age. His name is unknown, but Voldemort has taught him the Dark Arts since birth. He has killed at least a dozen Aurors. Why do you ask? Was this *Ethan* killed by Voldemort's son?"

Harry swallowed and laughed sadly. "Depends on how you look at it," he managed. "But Ethan... Ethan was killed by Voldemort."

"Another reason to defy him," whispered Dumbledore, and they both fell silent for a moment. "Here," said Dumbledore eventually, passing his school bag to him. "Perhaps your education here will teach you some of the more peaceful spells of the world."

"I doubt it," Harry said sadly. "This world is still at war, I'm going to have to continue studying curses and hexes. The Dark Arts..."

Dumbledore stood and reached across the table to place a comforting hand on this strange boy's shoulder. "Think of it this way," he whispered. "You study war and the Dark Arts, so that your brother and sister can study Charms and Transfiguration."

Harry stood as well and slung his new bag over his shoulder. "Yeah..." he managed. "Well, where do I go from here?"

Dumbledore blinked and seemed to forget himself for a moment. "Oh my," he said. "We have yet to sort out your timetable."

"Just stick me in Defence Against the Dark Arts, Charms, Potions, and Transfiguration."

"Very well," nodded Dumbledore and pointed his wand at a simple blank piece of parchment. "You need a fifth," he said.

"Care of Magical Creatures," Harry replied.

With a flick of his wand, Dumbledore sent quick lines of black ink swirling all across the parchment and after a few seconds Harry's timetable had formed. "It appears you are late for Charms, Mr. Potter," smiled Dumbledore.

Harry nodded tiredly. "Yeah..." he said. "I better get going."

Five minutes later and Harry was walking up through the castle absent mindedly. His thoughts were predominantly on the series of events that had led him to this point in his life. *How could this happen?* he thought. *Why am I here?*

He turned onto the corridor he knew held the Charms room and stopped for a minute at the end of it. He walked over to the nearest

window and looked out of it tiredly. "What am I doing?" he asked himself.

As he had expected, he did not receive an answer.

Harry sighed and rubbed his forehead, brushing his fingers over the dead scar that now only served as a reminder that he was a world away from the place he should be. He also realised that, for once, he was powerless to do anything about it. The Equinox was the key, and that was a year away.

Looking out of the window, Harry saw a Thestral fly high above the forest before sinking back under its canopy majestically. He looked over to Hagrid's cabin and saw him tethering a large horse-like creature to a fence post. *Familiar, yet different.*

Over at the castle gates he could just make out a group of white robed figures and Harry assumed they were Aurors. *I can't do this* he thought. *I shouldn't be here.* With a sigh, he turned away from the window and leaned remorsefully against the wall.

"What am I doing?" he asked himself again, closing his eyes.

"Heading to Charms?" asked a familiar voice.

Harry opened his eyes quickly and raised his palm in defence. He relaxed slightly when he saw who it was.

"Hi," smiled the familiar figure, "I'm Hermione Granger."

"Hello, Hermione," Harry said quietly. "I'm... Harry Potter."

"I know," replied Hermione. "Are you heading to Charms?"

Harry looked down the corridor to the double doors of the Charms room. He nodded and fell in step next to Hermione as she began to walk to the room. "We expected you'd be a Gryffindor," she said. "After all, your brother and sister are."

Harry nodded and couldn't help but stare at his best friend, who, in his world, was like the sister he never had. Here she didn't even know him. "How come you're not wearing any robes?" she asked.

Harry jumped out his memories and frowned. He looked down to see his white polo shirt and blue jeans, complete with the dragon hide boots he had brought with him from his universe. "I... forgot," he said, which wasn't really a lie as he had forgotten. "Hang on," he continued, pulling his wand out of his jeans pocket.

Hermione frowned and stopped walking as Harry removed his wand. "*Frrobus!*" Harry whispered, and his polo shirt was stretched and transfigured into a long, flowing pair of black robes that covered his jeans right down to his boots. He examined Hermione's and saw that his were missing the Gryffindor patch on the left side. "Close enough," he smiled.

"That was a nice piece of magic," Hermione commented as they reached the double doors of the Charms department. "How long will it last?"

Harry gave her a lopsided smile. "For as long as I want it to," he answered cryptically, as they entered the room.

Hermione smiled but she was confused. Didn't matter now though. "Sorry we're late, Professor," Hermione apologised to tiny Professor Flitwick as they entered. "I was just speaking with Professor Black about the new warning system."

Forty or so faces turned to look at them as they entered, and Harry saw many people he knew to be friends looking at him with a cold and calculating glance. "Harry here," continued Hermione. "Was..."

"Talking to Professor Dumbledore," he admitted.

"Welcome, Mr. Potter," Flitwick said slowly. "How nice to finally have you with us. Please take a seat you two."

"It's good to be here," Harry replied and took a seat near the back, next to Dean Thomas. Hermione took the last seat next to him.

Professor Flitwick continued his lesson on advanced summoning charms as Harry pulled out a clean piece of parchment and a quill. Hermione did the same.

"So, Harry," she asked. "Where've you been hiding the past six years?" Harry turned to face her and she saw an infinite sadness reflected in his eyes. "I'm sorry..." she began. "I shouldn't have-"

"No, it's okay," Harry jumped in quickly. "I've been... a world away," he answered, without lying.

"Oh," replied Hermione. "Would that be Australia?" she asked.

Harry shrugged and smiled slightly. "Something like that," he replied.

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"I believe the best we can manage is to create a hole in the wards for a few minutes, which should allow a large portion of my Death Eaters to enter the castle grounds."

"When do we strike, my Lord?" asked Bellatrix Lestrange.

"Soon, Bella," hissed Voldemort. "Soon..."

Voldemort returned to the ancient texts, written one thousand years ago by Salazar Slytherin himself. They detailed a key he had placed in the wards that would still be active today. All it needed was a drop of blood from the rightful heir. A hole in the wards would open, allowing brief access for one hundred of the most loyal Death Eaters.

"It will be close," Voldemort whispered. "But Hogwarts will fall. No one can protect them now."

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"That's a cool earring," commented Ron, as he walked down the corridor towards Defence Against the Dark Arts with Hermione, who had befriended the new Potter.

Harry smiled. "Yeah I got it a few months ago. It's supposed to have some magical properties, but nothing's happened yet." Harry raised his hand and flicked the small golden griffin that hung from his ear.

"I bet it's going to be weird for you, Harry," said Ron. "To have your Dad teaching you DADA now."

Harry laughed hollowly and looked at Ron. "You have no idea," he said, as the three of them entered the classroom.

"You play Quidditch?" asked Ron, as the three of them took a seat up the front of the large room. It was just like the room Harry knew from his own world. A large chamber that had several rows of desks arranged against two of the walls and the back of the room. Up the front was the Professor's desk and a large area, fit for duelling. On the walls were hung various pictures of dark creatures, texts on the subject lined the shelves, as did Dark detectors.

"He's been in hiding for nearly six years, Ron," stated Hermione. "I doubt he had time to play Quidditch."

"Actually," said Harry. "I play Seeker."

Ron smiled. "Well we'll have to get you out on a broom this weekend. I'm captain of the Gryffindor team, by the way. I play Keeper."

"How you doing in the cup this year?" asked Harry as James Potter appeared from the anteroom connected to the classroom.

"We made the final," said Ron. "The game this weekend will decide our opponent. I hope it's Slytherin, just so I can wipe the smirk of Malfoy's face."

"Bit of a git this Malfoy?" asked Harry.

Hermione kept her mouth shut but Ron didn't. "Son of a Death Eater. Wouldn't be surprised if he's already marked himself. That's him," pointed Ron.

Harry looked back and saw Malfoy, surrounded by his usual Slytherin crowd, seated at the back of the room on the far left. "Some things



never change..." he said under his breath, turning back around as his father spoke.

"Good morning," began James. "Did everyone do their homework? No, doesn't matter then. Never helped me back when I was here."

Harry watched with a small smile as the entire class, bar a few of the Slytherins, listened to every word his father said. They laughed along with him at the small jokes he made, and they respected him because he treated them as equals. He wasn't like Snape or the arrogant version he had seen in Snape's memories. His father was a good man, and Snape was the bitter one.

"Now," continued James. "We were going to finish our little duelling competition today, with the two top duellers in the class going at it. Is that right?" He was answered with several nods. "But we have a new duellist in the class today," he continued, staring at Harry. "My son, Harry. I think we should still have our original duel, and Harry can verse the winner. Any arguments?"

There were none, and Harry found himself wondering who the top two duellists in the class were. He looked around the room and saw a few likely candidates, but he was using the knowledge of these people that he had gained from the experiences in his world. *It could be any of them* thought Harry. *Even Neville....*

"Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy," said James. "The floor is yours."

Now Harry hadn't been expecting that. He knew the Hermione in his world was an excellent dueller when it came to sheer knowledge, but he didn't think she could have made it to the top of the class, unless everyone else hadn't had much experience. Malfoy on the other hand, from what Harry had seen of him, was probably a fairly competent dueller. *His father would have taught him some dirty tricks.*

Hermione and Malfoy moved into the centre of the room and James cast a few quick protection charms around the other students. They bowed every so slightly to each other, and then Hermione stuck first.

*"Expelliarmus!"* she cried, a long arc of red light shot from her wand but Malfoy side stepped it easily.

*"Incendio!"* Malfoy whispered, almost lazily, and white hot flames tore through the air in three small balls of fire.

Hermione managed to dodge them all and raised a small protego shield charm. *Good* thought Harry. *That should-*

Hermione's shield charm was shattered and exploded into dozen's of blue sparks as it came under a barrage of spells from Malfoy's wand. The majority of them were blasting curses, and after only four of them the shield was gone. Hermione staggered back under the force of the spells and from the surprise, but she hadn't made it this far for nothing.

*"Impedimenta!"* she cried, causing Malfoy to cease his barrage of curses and dodge the Impediment jinx. *"Stupefy!"* Hermione said, wasting no time before striking again.

Malfoy remained low on the ground and the curse flew over him again, dissipating harmlessly on the protection spells just before the desks. Malfoy sneered and brought his wand down in a long sweeping motion. He uttered something Hermione didn't catch but suddenly it was hard to breathe.

Harry frowned and almost jumped out of his seat as he realised what curse Malfoy had used. It was a Freezing curse and fell just short of being a full blown Dark Arts spell. It sucked all the heat out of the air all around the caster. It kept Malfoy warm, but it froze the air Hermione was trying to breathe.

Malfoy smirked and raised his wand again. *"Stupefy!"* he drawled, pointing his wand effortlessly at Hermione.

*No...* thought Harry as the red stream of light soared towards his once best friend. But Hermione hadn't been idle. It had taken her a few more seconds than Harry, but she had figured out what curse Malfoy had used and was now countering it with heating charms, making the air easier to breathe. In the process, she also raised a counter shield

and it was that that Malfoy's stunning spell hit, causing it to return upon its caster.

Malfoy's cold grey eyes widened in surprise for just a minute, but his father had taught him well. He used his own shield charm to deflect the curse and then took an aggressive step forward. "*Siarthus!*" he hissed and Harry almost had to be physically restrained from attacking the slimy git then and there.

That curse was, again, almost classified as a Dark one. It caused a painful, but short feeling in the bones that was the equivalent of being hit with a sledgehammer. Hermione side stepped it gracefully though, and Harry relaxed. "*Stupefy*," said Hermione, and Malfoy's shield shattered under the second stunning spell.

*Enough is enough* thought Malfoy, and fired a quick stunning spell of his own towards the Mudblood. Not wasting a second he fired another curse, this one designed to make any skin it touches erupt in sore boils.

Hermione successfully dodged the first and second curse, but she did not have time to return fire with one of her own. Malfoy used this to his advantage, and fired four quick stunning spells. Two directly at her, and two to where he thought she was going to be.

Hermione did not react fast enough as she beheld the four identical beams of light screaming towards her. She managed to dodge the first two, but she realised too late that the other two were fired not at her, but a few steps to her right. This meant that she stepped right into the third stunning spell, which knocked her out instantly. The fourth one caught Hermione in the chest as she was falling, and threw her back harshly onto the floor.

Ron jumped up in outrage and unleashed a bitter string of curse words at the blonde Slytherin. Harry glared at Malfoy nastily, he knew that he would be duelling him soon, and it was going to be painful.

"What's the matter, Weasley?" sneered Malfoy. "Was there ever any doubt I would win?"

"You didn't have to be so rough!" spat Ron, who had reached Hermione and drawn his wand.

"If I remember correctly," Malfoy began, "she stupidly walked right into my curses."

"It was a dirty move," Ron retaliated. "Exactly something I'd expect of a De-"

"That's quite enough, boys," Professor Potter said loudly, clearing his throat as he went.

Ron looked like he wanted to say more, but he just glared at the Slytherin and turned back to Hermione. "*Enervate*," he whispered, and couldn't help but smile as Hermione's eyes fluttered open in confusion. "You okay?" he asked.

Hermione frowned and stood up slowly. 'Hmm...? Oh... I lost. Yes, yes I'm fine, Ron."

Slowly Ron led Hermione back to her seat, and as he sat her down he whispered into Harry's ear. "I hope you know how to duel, Potter," Ron said. "Because no one has managed to wipe the smirk of that git's face yet."

Harry turned to look at Ron as Hermione held her head in her hands. "I think I can manage this," he said quietly.

"Well done, Malfoy," James said, a little hesitantly as he knew Malfoy had used an underhanded trick to win. "Are you up to duelling Harry now? Or would you like to rest for a bit?"

Malfoy's eyes narrowed as he gazed from James and then to Harry. He smirked and then twirled his wand lazily from hand to hand. "This won't take long," he drawled. "Let's just get it over with." All the Slytherins laughed, as did some Ravenclaws, but it did sound a bit forced.

James frowned, but nodded. From what he knew of Harry so far, he suspected that Malfoy was about to be brought down a few pegs.

*Harry claims he can hold his own against Voldemort* James thought. *I guess we'll see how competent he really is.*

"Harry," James said, ignoring Malfoy's insult at his son's capabilities. "Ready?"

Harry nodded and stood up, winking to Ron and smiling slightly, he walked over to the centre of the room, and turned to face his opponent. James replaced his protection spells with some new ones and then: "Whenever you're ready, boys," he said.

Harry and Malfoy bowed no more than an inch to each other, and took five steps back. Harry had yet to draw his wand, a fact that hadn't escaped Malfoy's attention. So when they turned back around to face each other, Malfoy frowned in arrogance and pointed his wand at Harry.

The entire class watched in confusion as Harry stood there, seemingly defenceless with his wand lying uselessly in his pocket. James also became worried, unsure as to what Harry was doing.

"What is he doing?" Ron whispered incredulously to Hermione.

Muttered whispers broke out all across the room and Malfoy sighed with boredom. "Very well," he said. "*Stupefy!*"

Harry reacted faster than anyone had ever seen before. This strange boy, who many had thought was dead, moved so fast he was like a blur. It took a full five seconds for Malfoy's curse to pass by where he now stood, and there were many gasps as no one had really seen him move.

James' jaw dropped but it slowly turned into a smile that he tried to keep hidden. He was supposed to remain impartial after all, but he couldn't help but think that this was going to be interesting.

*Is that it?* thought Harry, as the curse slowly shot past him. He hadn't even exerted himself doing that. There was a reason he hadn't raised his wand yet, and it wasn't because he could disarm Malfoy with a thought, no, he wanted to embarrass the Slytherin, and that meant making this look easy. After what he had just done to Hermione,

Harry wanted to hurt him, but he thought a psychological victory would be a lot more fitting.

Malfoy's eyes widened in surprise for a moment and he raised the strongest shield charm he could. *Nothing's getting through* he thought. *This Potter is fast, but he's a fool*, he continued to think. *I'll get him this time.*

"*Impedimenta*," Malfoy cried. "*Stupefy*."

Again, Harry sidestepped these curses as soon as they had been spoken. To the class it seemed that he had anticipated where the beams of light would strike before they had even been fired, which was amazing. However he was doing it, the two beams missed him by at least a metre and Harry just smiled at a furious looking Malfoy.

Harry had seen enough duels and fights in his life to anticipate where a curse would fly, and it had been only too easy to anticipate those two. He yawned theatrically just to see the enraged look on the Slytherin's face and then dodged another stream of blue light that would have locked his feet to the floor.

"I thought you were supposed to be the best duellist here," Harry sighed, making sure he checked his watch to see what time it was. The Gryffindors, Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws laughed and this only served to enrage Malfoy further.

"Keep smiling, Potter," he spat. "What are you a squib? Do you even have a wand?"

Harry shrugged and smiled as he saw the look on his father's face. But he was only just getting started. Harry stood in one of the beams of sunlight that filtered in through the high window and finally drew his wand.

Malfoy went on the defensive instantly, raising another shield and implementing all the protective magic he could think of. Harry let him have his protection; he knew he could destroy it with a thought if he tried really hard. Malfoy put another layer of protection between himself and this enigmatic Gryffindor. *That should do it* he thought. *Nothing short of the killing curse can get through that!*

Harry twirled his wand around lazily and took a few steps to his left. Malfoy shot a pain curse at him but he just simply walked out of its way. The class was still staring in amazement as this new arrival, this Harry Potter, shrugged away these curses as if they were nothing. They had all versed Malfoy in a duel at one point, and none of them could have bested him at all.

"Do you mind if I take a shot at you now?" asked Harry.

Malfoy sneered and fell into a mock bow, just to save face. Harry thanked him and then whispered a spell quietly under his breath, and pointed his wand at Malfoy's head.

This was not a curse though, and as such it could bypass all of Malfoy's protection easily. Silently, the thin, invisible beam of magic shot from Harry's wand and before anybody had realised what had happened, Malfoy's sleek blonde hair had turned the most violent shade of pink.

The Gryffindors clapped and cheered in laughter and the Slytherin's whispered insults at Harry. Malfoy looked ready to kill though, but Harry never gave him a chance to fire another curse. "*Insura rosa*," he said loud enough for everyone to hear, and again this spell passed harmlessly through Malfoy's layers of magical protection as it wasn't a curse of any kind.

The transfiguration charm hit Malfoy in the chest, and instantly transformed his expensive black silk robes into a very tight and revealing summer dress. This time the entire class lost it, including James, and Malfoy turned red with embarrassment as Harry merely smiled.

With a quick spell and a flick of his wand, Malfoy's clothes reverted to their original form. "HOW DARE YOU!" he bellowed. "DUEL ME LIKE A MAN OR NOT AT ALL!"

Everyone in the room stopped laughing as Harry's face turned dark. "Duel you like a man, you say?" he repeated slowly. "From what I've seen of your duelling today, I'd say it's you who needs to learn how to fight like a man. Or at least fairly."

"And from what you've shown me, I doubt you could fight at all!" Malfoy shot back.

Harry shrugged and stared deep into Malfoy's eyes, unblinking. "You want me to take a shot at you?" he asked quietly. Everyone heard him.

"If you know how," Malfoy replied. "Though nothing is getting through my shields."

Harry smiled dangerously. "Very well," he said. "A small stunning spell shouldn't do much harm."

Malfoy's face twisted into its familiar sneer. He knew it was an empty threat. The magic he had set up would return the curse twice as powerful. He had won.

Harry twirled his wand expertly between his fingers and after a brief moment he stopped and pointed it at Malfoy. He felt the power of his anger throbbing in his veins and he felt his magic respond to that emotion. He knew this stunning spell would end the duel. "Last chance to surrender," he offered, if only to further annoy the Slytherin.

Malfoy didn't reply, and the entire class held its breath as they waited for Harry to fire his curse.

With a sigh and a shrug, Harry called on a small portion of the strength he had used in some of his more powerful duels and made ready to release his stunner. Three seconds later, and he simply said "*Stupefy!*"

It was as silent as the night, but faster than most had ever seen a curse fly. Harry's stunning spell rocketed through the air and before Malfoy could react, it slammed into his shield charms with an incredible force and shattered them into nothing. His mouth opened in shock for a brief moment before the spell, now as loud as an explosion, ripped through his protections as if they were nothing. In only half a second, his entire protective magic had been completely obliterated and he took the stunner full in the chest.



He was knocked out instantly, and thrown backwards and high through the air. James' protective charms caught him only just, and he dropped to the stone floor hard, completely unconscious.

It took everyone a moment to process what had happened, as it had happened so fast. Harry calmly pocketed his wand and was returning to his seat when the Gryffindors finally broke out in cheers and applause. They were soon followed by the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, but the Slytherins glared at Harry venomously as a few of them rushed over to revive the unconscious Malfoy.

"Well it seems Mr. Malfoy did not remain the top dueller in this class for long," stated James as Malfoy staggered slowly to his feet. He fixed him with a calculating gaze before continuing. "Well done, Harry," he said quietly.

Half an hour later and Harry was walking down to the Great Hall for lunch with Ron, Hermione, Seamus, Neville, Dean, Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown all competing for his attention. Harry walked slowly, striving to listen to everyone as he re-made friends with all these familiar people.

"That was some pretty impressive magic, Harry," commented Ron, slapping him on the back. "Where'd you learn to duel like that?"

Harry shrugged. "Picked up a few skills along the way," he said.

"It would have taken a huge amount of power to destroy all of those shields though," Hermione said. "How did you manage it?"

Harry shrugged again as the small group of Gryffindor's waited for his answer. "Well I-"

"POTTER!" cried a furious voice from behind Harry, and he turned around in confusion.

He turned and saw Malfoy heading for him, wand in hand and his group of Slytherins behind him. Harry inwardly smiled. "Hello," he said.

Draco Malfoy was furious. Never had anyone bested him at duelling, nor in such a way as to cause real embarrassment. This *Harry Potter* would regret duelling him. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw the Gryffindors gather behind him, but he felt that they were there for protection more than anything else.

"Did you think I could just allow you to get away with that?" spat Malfoy, his eyes shooting daggers at Harry as his two goons, Crabbe and Goyle, cracked their knuckles menacingly.

Harry opened his mouth to speak but he felt someone pulling on his arm, as a crowd of younger and older students began to gather and watch the growing confrontation. Harry turned and winced as Hermione grasped his shoulder a bit too hard and disturbed his healing wound.

"Be careful, Harry," whispered Hermione. "You don't want to cross him. Just apologise...."

Now Harry was really confused. The Hermione he knew would never apologise if she wasn't in the wrong. It seemed as if she was slightly afraid of the blonde Slytherin.

"Your father is not here to lay down any rules this time, Potter," Malfoy continued and Harry turned back around. "You're going to regret coming to Hogwarts."

Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair. He feigned ignorance. "Who are you?" he asked the Slytherin in front of him.

Malfoy frowned and for a moment lost his composure. "I'm Draco Malfoy," he hissed. "Son of Lucius Malfoy. One of the highest pureblood families in the world."

"Ah," said Harry. "You're no one."

Everyone within hearing distance gasped audibly, except Ron who couldn't help but laugh, and Harry joined him. Malfoy's face turned red with anger and he raised his wand. "I don't know who you think you are-"

"I'm Harry."

"Enough!" spat Malfoy. "*Vilasucus!*"

Harry had been expecting that, and he waved his hand ever so slightly and whispered a countering shield charm. Malfoy only stood ten feet away, so the purple beam of curse light travelled fast between the two of them. It hit Harry's shield to the surprise of all and was shot back at Malfoy twice as powerful.

Before anyone had even realised what had happened, Malfoy was hit by his own curse and pushed back into Goyle, who staggered slightly under his weight but didn't fall. Malfoy was out cold though, and probably wouldn't awake for a few hours.

With Goyle busy holding him up, Crabbe turned to see his fallen friend and for a moment didn't know what to do. He decided to physically attack Harry and turned back around-

To see the tip of Harry's wand pointed right between his eyes, only a few inches away. *Damn he's fast...* Crabbe growled.

Harry's face turned dark, but he was glad to see that this Crabbe had some sense about him. He didn't make another attempt to attack. "Just walk away," Harry said coldly. "Take your moronic friend over there and leave."

In the end there was really no choice. Crabbe nodded dumbly and, between him and Goyle, the two of them carried Malfoy down the corridor towards the Entrance Hall, from there they could head to their common room. The stunned crowds parted to allow them to pass through as they went, and most turned back to stare at Harry a little fearfully.

Harry pocketed his wand and turned back to the group of Gryffindor's. "Some people never learn," he shrugged. "Weren't we heading to the Great Hall?"

Slowly the crowds began to move again, and most gave Harry a wide berth as he walked next to Ron and Hermione, who looked slightly worried. Five minutes later and most of the school were seated in the

Great Hall for lunch. Whispers were already spreading of the impromptu duel in the corridor between the new stranger, Harry Potter, and the one person at Hogwarts who you shouldn't anger, Draco Malfoy.

Harry was calmly sipping some pumpkin juice from his goblet and pointedly ignoring the stares and worried glances his fellow Gryffindors were giving him. The first few minutes of lunch passed in an uncomfortable silence, and Harry was growing tired of the looks of pity upon their faces. What had he done? He'd won the little duel in DADA and the corridor.

Finally they became too much, and he put his goblet down. "All right," he said forcefully. "What is it?"

Hermione, who was sitting opposite him next to Ron, bit her bottom lip as the other Gryffindors turned away, wanting nothing to do with this rebel amongst them. Ron nudged his girlfriend and best friend of six years and Hermione finally spoke.

"I don't think you should have attacked Malfoy, Harry," she whispered, looking around nervously for listening ears.

"I didn't," Harry said, not bothering to lower his voice. "He attacked me. I only used magic for defence."

"But you embarrassed him," Ron whispered. "And you know who his father is."

Harry frowned. "Okay," he began, "first, I couldn't care less that I embarrassed that greasy Slytherin. From what I've seen today he had it coming for a long time. And two, his father is Lucius Malfoy, Voldemort's lapdog."

Ron paled instantly and everyone around Harry dropped whatever form of cutlery they had been holding. Harry took a deep breath and counted backwards from ten. "Don't tell me that was because I said his name?"

Hermione nodded and started biting her nails. "Malfoy will tell his father," she continued to whisper. "This could make it as far as You-Know-Who's list..."

"List?" echoed Harry. "Voldemort has a list?"

"Stop saying his name," Ron urged and Hermione nodded.

Harry ignored him. "What is this list? Is it like a To Do List or something? One: murder innocent children. Two: Wash evil robes. Three: Burn mark into some new morons. Things like that?"

Ron was staring at him in disbelief and Hermione shook her head fiercely. "No..." she continued desperately. "It's a list of people he's going to kill. You make the list," she said. "You don't get off it alive."

Harry blinked and noticed the two Gryffindors to his left and right shudder involuntarily. "Who's on this list?"

Hermione glanced quickly up at the staff table and saw the headmaster's twinkling eyes staring back at her. "Dumbledore of course," she said sadly. "Sirius Black, Remus Lupin and... and your father, Harry. I thought you would know that?"

Harry nodded absent mindedly. "Remus Lupin is...." he began.

"Head of the Auror Division," finished Ron. "What's left of it anyway...."

"There are at least a dozen other people on the list," said Hermione. "But those four are the best known, as they are the most tireless fighters against You-Know-Who."

"Things certainly are different..." Harry whispered to himself under his breath. "So... because of this list," he said a lot louder. "I should just allow Draco Malfoy to walk all over me because it might get back to Voldemort that I-"

"Stop saying his name," Ron said fiercely.

"Why?" asked Harry theatrically, waving his arms. "It's just a name."

Ron looked worried. "Yeah... but it's *his* name. You-Know-Who is... is-"

"Nothing more than a cold-hearted murderer," Harry ended, and began to peel an orange. "And I don't fear him."

"Then you're either incredibly brave or incredibly stupid," Hermione said, rather coldly. "What makes you so confident?"

Harry winked and smiled slightly. "Experience..." he whispered.

Hermione looked sceptical. "Experience fighting You-Know-Who! You must be lying."

Harry shrugged and then pulled his timetable out of his pocket. "What have we got next?" he asked, scanning the list.

"All the sixth year Gryffindors have Transfiguration," Ron stated, reaching over and linking his hand with Hermione's. "You any good at that?" he asked.

"We'll let McGonagall decide that one," Harry replied and was met with confused gazes from both Ron and Hermione. "What is it?"

"Harry..." began Hermione slowly. "We haven't been taught by McGonagall for four years... ever since she died, back in second year. Professor Black has taken the class since then."

Harry froze and grasped his fork hard. "Sirius Black...?" he managed quietly. Hermione nodded the affirmative. "He teaches Transfiguration?"

"Yeah," nodded Ron. "Good friend of your fathers, isn't he? Always telling us stories about how he and your dad used to run an underground smuggler's run from Hogsmeade."

Harry blinked and looked up to the staff table from where he sat along his house table. Sure enough, he hadn't noticed it before, but Sirius was seated next to his father, and both were glancing at him surreptitiously. He swallowed slowly. "Is he a good teacher...?" Harry asked.

"Oh yes," Hermione nodded. "An Animagus himself, he can transform into a-"

"Black dog," finished Harry. "A big black dog that could be mistaken for the Grim."

Ron snorted into his pumpkin juice. "You wouldn't believe how many times he's scared Trelawney by lying in wait in the halls. Bloody brilliant if you ever see that!"

"I'll bet," Harry said quickly and then stood up. "I have to go," he whispered. "I'll- I'll see you later."

Without waiting for a reply, Harry jumped up over his seat and headed for the double doors of the Great Hall. His thoughts a mess and his emotions awash, he practically ran out of the Hall and headed up the stairs of the Entrance Hall, towards the tower of moving staircases.

Harry didn't make it that far.

After rounding the first corner, he fell against a wall and wiped the tears roughly from his eyes. Tears that belonged to another man, in another world, who had died long before his time was due. *They don't belong here* Harry thought. *I don't belong here....*

Harry had mourned for Sirius, he had grieved and, after months of strife and turmoil, he had personally accepted that fact that Sirius was gone, that he was dead. It was a cruel twist of fate that he had to see him alive again, laughing with his friends. His face wasn't even hollowed from spending twelve years in Azkaban. It wasn't fair, on anyone.

Harry took a deep breath and tried desperately to fight back the tears. He wasn't going to cry... no, he was stronger than that. He had to be. For a moment Harry was lost in the irony of the situation. He wasn't entirely sure why seeing Sirius had effected him so much. Having seen his parents hadn't had the same effect.

"I don't belong here..." he whispered. "It's all wrong. Why...?"

Harry sniffed and stared out of the nearby window, out once more onto the grounds. Not for the first time, he felt that life had finally given him too much to deal with. *Another world!* People were alive who should be dead. He'd met family that he would never have known otherwise. *He shouldn't be here.*

But Harry knew he was here for a good few months yet. However much he wanted it to be different it never could be. And there was also the constant threat of Voldemort, who seemed to have Hogwarts grasped in his icy grip. *I'll change that* he thought viciously. *Just give me the fight!*

As the sounds of the school from down below reached his ears, Harry realised that lunch must have finished and he began to move on. *Transfiguration... I'll have to face it sooner or later.*

Walking slowly, but with a surprising burst of confidence, Harry headed up to the Transfiguration department. It only took him five minutes to reach the classroom, and he entered with some trepidation. Again, this room looked exactly as it had done in his world. Desks and chairs lined three of the four walls and, on a raised platform up the front, stood the Professor's table. It was piled high with loose parchments and was just what Harry would expect of Sirius.

Smiling sadly, he took a seat up the far back corner and counted the seconds down until the class started. Groups of other sixth years came in a few at a time, and Harry noticed most of them avoided sitting near him. *Is Malfoy's influence really that bad?* No one wanted to be associated with him, less they be deemed his friend, and therefore an enemy of Malfoy. Harry could care less what they thought.

They were all familiar to him though, someone he had known or known of back in his own world. Even the few Gryffindors that had arrived, most notable Parvati and Lavender, had steered clear of him. Fairly soon the class was as full as it was going to get, and Ron had sat down next to Harry, with Hermione next to him. Harry inwardly smiled at this, some things never change.



When Sirius strolled into the room, Harry followed him with sad, dark eyes that Ron and Hermione couldn't help but notice. Sirius was smiling though, and as he turned to view the class, his eyes connected with Harry's for just a moment, but it was a moment that caused Harry to look away in pain.

"You all right?" asked Ron.

Harry began to shake his head absent mindedly but then nodded quickly. "I'm fine," he replied. "I'm fine...."

"Good afternoon," began Sirius. "I see we're missing a few students today. I hear Mr. Malfoy was on the receiving end of a particularly nasty curse. Now I believe it was one of my Gryffindors," he continued strictly. "I would like you to own up now." He then offered Harry a lopsided smile. "So I can congratulate you."

Harry couldn't help but laugh, and the rest of the class did so nervously as well. "Harry Potter," continued Sirius. "Everywhere I go around this old castle I hear your name. It didn't take you long to make an enemy."

Harry breathed in deeply as his eyes locked again with Sirius'. This time Harry held his own. "It never does," he replied cryptically. "Never does...."

Sirius looked shaken for a moment but he still nodded. "Right," he said. "Right... where were we last lesson?" he turned to address the whole class.

"Chapter thirteen, Professor," Hermione answered instantly. "The Animagus transfiguration."

"Ah yes," smiled Sirius. "Not many magical folk have this capability. In fact, there have only been a handful of them in the last century."

"A handful of *registered* ones," Harry said rather loudly.

Sirius let out a rough bark of laughter. "I'm going to give you five points for that one, Harry," he said. "There are, of course, many

unregistered Animagi out there. Always be mindful of a suspicious looking creature. It could be anyone."

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"That's it, Albus," Arthur Weasley sighed, shaking his head.

Dumbledore nodded and thanked Arthur, whose head shone in the flames of the fire. "Inform the other Order members," he said. "Start with Remus."

"Can do," Arthur said, and his head disappeared from the flames.

Dumbledore turned from the fire, walked back over to his desk and sat down slowly. He sighed and conjured a cup of tea.

"You're getting to old for this!" a voice from above him said, and Dumbledore smiled ever so slightly.

"You think so, Phineas?" he asked. "Tell me, when should I have slipped away quietly into retirement?"

"Half a century ago," the portrait of Phineas Nigellus responded. "After you toppled the first madman."

Dumbledore laughed quietly. "There will always be one more to assume the mantle of Dark Lord. I should have stopped Tom when he was a child."

"You didn't create him, Dumbledore," Phineas replied. "Monsters such as him are... born that way. Pass this fight on to the next generation."

Dumbledore shook his head. "You heard what Arthur said," he began, "Death Eater activity has been next to nothing. He is coming for Hogwarts. I am needed here."

"I fear you're correct," admitted Phineas. "You should inform the staff."

"I will," nodded Dumbledore, but then paused for a moment. "Do you think young Harry can really do what he has promised?"

"Destroy Voldemort?" asked Phineas. "Hmm... That boy is an enigma. I'd say no, though. He has shown nothing beyond arriving in our world to prove his worth."

Dumbledore's face did not betray his feelings. "When Tom comes I will fight him," he finally said. "I don't think Harry is ready."

"Perhaps," Phineas replied. "But does he know that?"

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"Three days," hissed the Dark Lord atop his throne in the spike of Slytherin Fortress. "Prepare the attack for three days time."

"Yes, my Lord," replied Lucius Malfoy. "Should I inform the entire army, or just those selected few chosen to battle by your side?"

"Inform everyone, Lucius," Voldemort responded. "I want the old man to worry."

"Very well, my Lord," Malfoy said, bowing low. "Your will shall be done."

Lucius walked quickly out of the room to complete his task, as Voldemort continued his study of Salazar's ancient texts. *I will meet this Harry Potter* he thought. *I will destroy him for daring to exist!*

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## Chapter 5 - Show No Fear

*Courage is not the lack of fear but the ability to face it.*

*--Lt. John B. Putnam Jr.*

Daylight flared magnificently over the far mountain in the distance, as a lone figure watched from atop the Astronomy tower of Hogwarts. Long, distant beams of live giving sunlight began to warm the world for a new day, as a rooster crowed somewhere in the vastness of the grounds.

Harry closed his eyes and breathed in the early morning air deeply. It felt good to just sit and watch the sun rise, whilst he worked desperately to sort out the mess of emotions that was his mind. He had been here for several hours, ever since waking up just after midnight in his new bed in the sixth year dormitory. He had dreamed of a basilisk, not the one he had fought and slain in the Chamber of Secrets, but one several times larger that was pure silver. He had been unable to sleep after that, and had decided to clear his head up on the Astronomy tower.

It had become somewhat of a habit of Harry's over the past two days to come and sit up there in the silence as everyone else was sleeping. He had been back in his regular lessons for two days now, and for the most part people ignored him and gave him a wide berth. Harry knew why they avoided him as well. It was because of Draco Malfoy.

*Harry had been marked.*

Word had spread through the castle like wildfire that Harry was on Voldemort's to-kill list. It was a rumour most likely started by Malfoy, but it did annoy Harry that good people he had known to be strong in his own world, were frightened of Malfoy and his gang of Slytherins.

Whoever had started it, most of the student population avoided him like the plague. Harry found it hard to really care though. *So what!* he thought *Voldemort has been after me my entire life. It was only a matter of time before he found me here. Evil always does...*

Harry found himself thinking of Ron and Hermione, the Ron and Hermione he had known in his own world and how they differed from the weaker, less principled versions here. Hermione was a lot more shy here, a lot more, and Harry knew it was down to Voldemort's massive influence in this world. Ron was still Ron really; he was just a lot quieter.

Harry also found himself thinking of Ginny, and how he had yet to talk to her in this world. He was not really sure that he should anyway, as this Ginny didn't know him at all, and that could be painful. For now he had decided to steer clear of her, but he knew situations like this could change in a heartbeat.

Before the sun had fully risen, Harry walked back to the Gryffindor common room. "*Starlight*," he whispered, and the Fat Lady opened her portrait for him. Harry performed a small cleaning charm on his glasses and headed into the familiar common room. It was almost identical to the one in his world. The only notable difference was the large warning bell hanging from the ceiling, which would sound in times of danger.

Harry collapsed into one of the armchairs by the fire and stared at the dying embers of the once thriving flame. He recalled sitting here countless times throughout the years, hoping desperately for a better tomorrow. It hadn't come yet, and he sighed as the enormity of what had happened hit him again.

He had entered another world. With so many similarities and differences Harry got a headache just thinking about keeping the two worlds separate in his mind. There was too much information to process, too much he knew or didn't know. He was bound to let something slip sooner or later, that could be harmful in this world.

Shaking his head in regret, Harry listened as he heard footsteps coming down the stairs that led to the boy's dormitories. He didn't turn around as this person entered the common room, but he cleared his throat just to make his presence known.

"Harry!" cried a startled voice and Harry did turn this time, and saw his younger brother, Michael Potter, standing at the foot of the stairs.

"Hello," Harry said kindly. "How are you?"

"Fine," Michael said evasively, and walked over to Harry, keeping his left side hidden as best he could. Harry frowned at this.

"You sure?" he asked again.

Michael Potter didn't turn so Harry couldn't see his whole face, but he nodded the affirmative anyway. He sat down in the armchair opposite Harry. "You look tired," Michael commented, and then finally turned to face Harry completely.

"I never sleep very well," he answered quietly. "You look tired as well-"

Harry stopped and stared at Michael's face. He had a big, purple bruise around his left eye that Harry had first thought was a black ring from lack of sleep. But he did not have one underneath his right eye, and Harry sighed. "Who did that?" he asked.

Michael shifted uncomfortably. "It's nothing..." Michael whispered, touching his black eye.

Harry wouldn't give up that easily. He stared at his twelve year old brother for a moment and then spoke. "It doesn't look like nothing. What happened?"

Michael shrugged. "Got into a fight..." he mumbled under his breath. "Didn't do very well..."

Harry repeated his question. "What happened?"

Michael wouldn't look at Harry as he spoke. "Three fourth year Slytherins told me that you were going to die, that the Dark Lord was coming for you. I said you'd fight You-Know-Who."

"I will," nodded Harry, not bothering with secrecy. "And what did they say to that?"

Michael smiled sadly. "Not much..." he whispered. "One of them hit me, and then that was it. Nobody watching did anything. I was too

weak to do anything and they were all too scared to fight a Slytherin."

Harry had remained impassive during his brother's story, but now he saw the anger and sadness reflected in his eyes. Michael was close to tears. "Did you tell anyone?" Harry asked eventually. "Besides me?"

Michael shook his head and wiped his eyes on his sleeve. "No... It happened last night after dinner. I didn't tell anyone."

Harry nodded with understanding. "And you say there were three of them?" he asked. Michael nodded. "And you still defended me," Harry smiled. "I don't think that was weak."

Michael looked up into Harry's eyes for the first time. "I couldn't fight them," he said. "I didn't even have a chance to draw my wand. I'm only twelve... I'm too young to fight back."

Harry watched Michael look away again, but he secretly came to a decision in his mind. He stood up and went and sat next to his brother, surveyed him for a moment, and then spoke. "You're never too young..." Harry whispered seriously. "To fight for what you believe in, to fight back." He stopped there for a moment but soon continued. "When I was your age," he said, "I killed a basilisk. I had a bit of help I suppose, but I fought it, stabbed it with a sword and it died."

Michael looked up with wonder and disbelief in his eyes. He was torn between believing Harry, and knowing that what he said was incredibly unlikely. "You... couldn't have."

Harry nodded. "Oh yeah," he said. "In my second year. I was twelve, just like you." Harry put a reassuring hand on his younger brother's shoulder. "What I'm trying to say is that you are strong, if you want to be. Don't let other people push you around, Michael. It will happen your entire life, there will always be people who try and control you, but you can't let them. You should never let them. Fight back, show them you're stronger."

"But I'm not stronger," Michael said quietly. "Those Slytherins-"

"Attacked you in numbers," Harry cut him off. "A coward's tactic really. Next time you'll be ready for them though."

"How...?" he asked sadly, though there was a glimmer of hope in his eyes.

Harry frowned and stood up. He began to pace up and down in front of Michael, and then finally drew his wand. "If you promise to keep quiet about this," Harry said, smiling conspiratorially. "I'll teach you a bit of magic that should make anyone think twice about attacking you again."

Michael was most eager. He smiled brightly and stood up quickly, withdrawing his wand from within the pocket of his robes as he went. "What is it?" he asked.

Harry pointed his wand at one of the nearby armchairs. "*Erateuax*," he said quietly, and the armchair was blasted off of the ground and hurtled up towards the roof. It fell just short and came crashing back down to the common room floor, splintering and cracking into a fluff filled mess.

Michael jumped back in surprise. "Cool..." he whispered.

Harry couldn't help but smile. "*Reparo*," he said, pointing his wand again at the chair. It repaired itself as good as new. "Your turn," he then told Michael.

Michael nodded and pointed his own wand at the repaired armchair. "*Erateuax!*" he cried. The chair wasn't destroyed like when Harry had used the curse, but the wave of power Michael shot at it did knock it back a good few feet.

Harry returned his wand to his pocket. "Practice it a bit more," he said. "Whenever you've got time. It'll work the same way on those Slytherins, and on more than one as well. It should even the odds a bit, though I doubt they'll want to fight if you knock them all off their feet with a single spell."



Michael nodded and returned his own wand to his pocket. "Thanks, Harry," he said happily. Harry didn't say anything, but he placed his right palm over Michael's face. "What are you-"

"*Verius*," Harry said and felt the familiar warm tingling feeling of his wandless magic shoot up his arm and gather on his palm. In an instant, the bruise around Michael's eye had disappeared. "Better?" asked Harry.

"You... You did wandless magic!" Michael whispered. "That's... that's-"

Harry winked at him once. "That's another secret we can have," he finished, and then turned away heading for the stairs to the dormitory.

"Harry," Michael said as he reached the bottom stair. Harry stopped and turned back to face him. "Did you... did you really kill a basilisk?"

Harry smiled sadly, as images of the massive snake leered down upon him in the Chamber of Secrets. "Oh yes..." he said. "I did. Never doubt your strength, Michael."

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"How are you, Harry?" asked Lily Potter, as she removed the bandages around Harry's shoulder wound.

"I'm as well as to be expected," he replied quietly, not quite looking his mother in the eyes.

He sat on one of the many beds in the Hospital wing, and was here for his check-up on the stab wound in his shoulder. Harry winced quietly as the bandage was removed from his stinging shoulder, and he sighed as he beheld the bloody mess that it was.

"Ouch," commented Lily. "Has this been giving you any trouble?" she asked, cleaning the wound now with some warm water.

Harry shrugged. "Nothing I couldn't handle. Just aching mostly." He winced again as the water touched his skin.

"Well I healed it as best I could the other day," Lily smiled kindly. "But there is some residual magic in the wound."

"Yeah," Harry nodded. "That'll be from the sword."

Lily bit her bottom lip as she washed away the dried blood on Harry's cut shoulder. "What sword?" she asked after a long moment had passed.

"Doesn't matter," Harry replied tiredly.

Lily finished cleaning the wound in silence, and marvelled at the fact that Harry didn't seem to be bothered by the amount of pain she knew he would be in as she disturbed his healing shoulder. "There we are," she said after a few minutes, and began to wrap new bandages around the wound.

Harry nodded his thanks but remained seated as his mother finished with the bandages and vanished the old dirty ones with her wand. Slowly, Harry rotated his shoulder in small circles. "Feels better," he commented.

Lily smiled warmly. It was a mother's smile. "I hear you've made quite a reputation for yourself around the castle, Harry," she said.

Harry laughed quietly, and with some regret. "Yeah... wowed them all by embarrassing Draco Malfoy and making light of Voldemort."

"Voldemort is not someone who should be taken lightly," Lily said, sitting down on the bed next to Harry.

Harry shrugged. "He doesn't scare me," he began but then changed the subject. "Do you know if he plans to attack Hogwarts soon?" he asked.

It was Lily's turn to shrug now. "We usually don't know until he does attack, but he has never breached the wards yet, so everyone in the castle is safe. And the Aurors from the Ministry have a quick response time."

Harry nodded and then stood up, putting his black polo shirt back on as he went. "Thanks..." he said, somewhat nervously.

Lily just smiled and stood up. She wrapped her arms around Harry in a warm hug. She knew this was new to him, but it would make him feel better, feel accepted. "That's okay, Harry," Lily replied, letting him go. "So... what have you got planned for this morning. You don't have any lessons until after lunch, right?"

"Yep," Harry replied. "I'm going to the library. Read up on some recent history."

"Well I'll see you later then. We're having a family dinner in our quarters tonight, Harry. Sometimes the Great Hall is just too much. You are, of course, welcome to come."

Harry looked briefly into his mother's emerald green eyes. "I... I'd like that," he managed, and then left the infirmary without another word, heading for the library.

Ten minutes later and Harry entered the massive library. Again, it looked just like the one in his world. Rows upon rows of long elegant bookcases stretched as far as he could see, way back to the far wall in the end of the maze of stacks. The second floor was equally filled with pretty much every magical text anyone at Hogwarts could wish for. His eyes also flicked over to the restricted section and he smiled briefly as he recalled his earlier exploits in that section.

There were quite a few people in the library and Harry saw many sixth year Gryffindors, Ravenclaws, Slytherins, and Hufflepuffs talking happily to each other, or studying quietly in small groups. It seemed the entire year might have this morning off. Harry did not head over in their direction though; he knew he wouldn't be welcome. Voldemort was still too much of a threat for him to be called friend.

Whether or not Harry changed Voldemort's status in this world, he really couldn't care less what these people thought of him. They were only out for their own survival, none of them seemed to believe they had the strength to make a difference. Hell, they'd let Malfoy become the top dueller in the year. No, Harry didn't want much to do with them.

He headed into the stacks, towards the recent history section and soon came upon it. Harry scanned the titles and selected a few that could help him.

*Wizarding History - The Last Fifty Years.  
The Dark War  
Dark Lords of the Twentieth Century  
Twenty Years of War*

With these tomes in hand, Harry turned and walked back out of the stacks and towards an empty table near the massive paned glass window that looked out upon the grounds and lake. Placing his books on the table, Harry sat down in the sunlight streaming in through the window and for a moment just relaxed.

Eventually he turned to the first book and began to flip through it slowly, trying to learn a few small facts of history in this new and strange world where he hadn't defeated Voldemort. Not much in the *Wizarding History* book was overly useful; most of it was merely politics and law. The second book, *The Dark War*, was again not overly useful. It detailed attacks and tactics used by the Aurors to fight Death Eaters. If there was one thing Harry knew, it was how to fight Death Eaters. He cut his losses and picked up the last book. *Twenty Years of War*.

Now this book was what he wanted. It had attacks on Hogsmeade, Diagon Alley, the Ministry, and even Hogwarts. It was a lot more detailed than the previous book and even offered recommendations on how certain attacks may have been different if the Aurors had changed their tactics. It was had a timeline of Voldemort's rise to power, which Harry noticed had an entry on Halloween Night, 1981.

*The Dark Lord attacked the Potter's at Godrics Hollow. Peter Pettigrew murdered.*

Harry read through the timeline slowly, and his eyes fell on an entry on August 31<sup>st</sup>, 1991. He swallowed and let out a long held breath.

*The Dark Lord attacked Diagon Alley. Harry Potter murdered.*

Harry read the rest of the timeline and came to the latest entry, an attack on Diagon Alley one year ago. It was a recently published book. He flipped on through a couple more chapters and found vague references to the possible hiding place of the Dark Lord. *The Fortress of Slytherin*. Harry knew for a fact that the Voldemort in his world had been hiding in one of Slytherin's castles, it made sense to think he would do the same here.

For the next few hours Harry remained at the table and read the books on recent history. It was a lot to take in. Several major events were different, such as the election of the Minister, and the continued war against Voldemort. Harry could see from all the lost battles and bitter remarks made by the author of this book, that the Light side was slowly being hemmed into a corner in this war.

With a sad smile, Harry realised that if he did fight to change the course of this war it would most likely throw him back into the public's eye. *A price I'll have to pay*, he thought. The more he read, the more Harry began to think that his coming to this world was neither a coincidence nor an accident. It had to be the will of some higher being. The war would hinge on whether or not he fought, the balance of power would be tipped by his decisions. Harry smiled; Voldemort, this world, was in for a surprise.

The siren for lunch rang out in the distance but Harry wasn't hungry, and he was tired of having to suffer the calculating and cold glances of those, in his world, he called friends. He remained at the library over lunch, and pulled a few texts on hexes and curses from the shelves to help pass the time.

As lunch neared an end, Harry sighed and began to return the books to their proper place. He now had his first Potions lesson in this new world, and from what he'd seen of Snape so far, not much promised to be different there. The potions dungeon was a good ten minutes away, so Harry set off at a slow walk through the empty corridors.

As he turned onto the balcony above the Entrance Hall, Harry caught sight of all the students exiting the Great Hall, and he spotted a handful of Gryffindor sixth years heading towards the door on the

ground floor that led to the dungeons. He didn't try to catch up with them, and walked down the Entrance Hall stairs alone.

After navigating his way down and through the dungeons, Harry finally reached the familiar potions room and entered it quietly. As if on cue, all of the sixth years in the room fell silent. Harry briefly scanned the room before taking a seat on a stool at the back of the dungeon.

A cauldron bubbled away with boiling water in front of him, and Harry began to tick away the minutes until this lesson would be over. It wasn't long before Snape swept into the room bitterly; casting frowns and sneers to all who didn't belong in Slytherin, and piercing Harry with a particularly sharp glance.

Harry returned his glare defiantly and it was a good half a minute before Snape turned away and began the lesson. Once again, Harry found himself sitting alone at the back of the room. He spotted Hermione across the way, seated with Seamus. Ron didn't appear to have Potions now, and that left Harry on his own. Though he doubted the Ron of this world would have chosen to sit next to him. Defiance against the Death Eater Slytherins seemed like madness to most.

"Fifty minutes in silence," spat Snape. "The Draught of Confidence is an especially complex mix for your year level. Instructions are on the board," he continued, waving his wand at the board behind him. "This will be assessed."

Harry frowned as he went and collected the ingredients for the rather easy mix. It seemed the sixth years in this world were not as advanced in Potions as the sixth years in Harry's world. He had successfully concocted the Draught of Confidence back in his fifth year. It certainly wasn't difficult and it definitely would not take him fifty minutes.

After gathering the ingredients from the supplies room, Harry went back to his cauldron at the back, ignoring the scowl Malfoy gave him as he past by. He began to chop a newt into quarters as whispers of conversation reached his ears, most of it concerning his untimely death that appeared to have been finalised, thanks to a letter Malfoy

had sent to his father. As with everything else, Harry ignored it and began to pour the ingredients into the bubbling cauldron.

Twenty minutes later and the liquid in Harry's cauldron turned a deep purple, with a thick silvery layer across the top, forming a filmy skin. His potion was done. He carefully poured some into a glass phial and then stoppered and labelled it.

Snape scowled as he approached this desk, and without a word Harry placed the completed potion in front of him and turned away. "May I have a word, Potter," Snape said, and the whole class fell silent.

Harry nodded and turned back around, looking at the greasy potions master expectantly. "Yes?" he asked.

"I have been told by a reliable source that you attacked one of my Slytherins two days ago, and have yet to be punished for this. Is this true?"

Harry shrugged and glanced at Malfoy over his shoulder, who was smirking triumphantly. "He attacked me, and I use the word 'attacked' loosely, and I defended myself."

Snape's scowl seemed to frown and there were muttered whisperings around the room. Malfoy jumped to his feet. "LIAR!" he shouted.

"Thank you, Draco," continued Snape and the arrogant Slytherin took his seat. "Now, Potter. Who do you think I am going to believe? Mr. Malfoy, who, might I remind you, is a prefect, or you?"

Harry shrugged again and ran a hand through his hair. "I don't really care," he said. "You know what happened, but the truth has never bothered you before so just get on with it."

Snape's face blotted with anger as gasps rang out from the watching students. "Twenty points from Gryffindor, Potter."

Harry sighed and turned away again, now heading for the door to the potions dungeon. "Another twenty for your cheek," spat Snape, standing up. "Do not turn your back to me!"

Harry groaned in frustration and turned back around. "What do you want?" he asked tiredly. Looking around the room, he saw everyone following this argument with unblinking gazes.

"A week's detention for your unprovoked attack on Mr. Malfoy, Potter. To be served with me," Snape began. "And another week for your cheek shown here today."

*Two weeks detention* thought Harry. *Got off light really.* But he wasn't going to do it. "No," he said simply and this time didn't turn back as he headed for the door. Snape called for him to stop but he closed the door behind him and set off back up towards the library, at least there he could get some real work done.

The Entrance Hall was empty as Harry entered it from the dungeons, and he made for the stairs. No sooner had he stepped on the first one though, than the doors of the Great Hall opened and out walked Albus Dumbledore.

"Harry," he smiled upon spotting him standing on the first stair. "How are you?"

Harry paused and waited for the wizened headmaster to reach him before moving. "I'm doing all right," he said.

"Excellent, excellent," nodded Dumbledore as the two of them now headed up the stairs together. "But I believe you should be in Potions now?" he questioned Harry.

Harry nodded. "Yes I should, but Snape was being Snape so I left."

"*Professor* Snape, Harry," Dumbledore corrected gently as the two of them walked on from the top of the stairs.

Harry changed the subject expertly. "What's happening with Voldemort?" he asked none too subtly.

Dumbledore paused in mid step and stared at Harry, who had turned to look in his eyes. "Not a single Death Eater attack in three days. He is preparing for an attack on Hogwarts; I believe he is coming for you."



They began to walk again and soon came to the tower of moving staircases. "It was only a matter of time," Harry shrugged, ascending the first staircase with Dumbledore. "I'll be ready when he comes."

Dumbledore frowned and Harry saw he was worried. "I do not think this is your fight, Harry. I am not sure what your life was like in your world, but this will be a real battle. Hundreds fighting on either side, with Voldemort and myself at its head."

Harry smiled remorsefully. "That was exactly what the last few months of my life have been like. I am ready to face Tom, he won't kill me."

Dumbledore reached out his hand and stopped Harry by placing it on his good shoulder. For a moment they stared deep into each other's eyes, Dumbledore searching for answers to a thousand questions that spun through his mind. Eventually, he spoke;

"Where is your fear, Harry...?" he whispered so quietly it was almost not heard, just on the edge of his breath. "How can you be so sure he will not defeat you?" Dumbledore then asked normally.

Harry clicked his teeth and in one brief moment thought of all the times he had faced Voldemort or Voldemort's evil. "Because he never has," Harry answered Dumbledore truthfully. "I don't lose, not to him. I never have..."

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"So how has your week been so far, Harry?" asked James, as the five of them sat down for dinner that night.

Harry sat down next to Melissa, who smiled as he looked at her but it seemed a little forced. James sat at the head of the table, opposite Lily, and Michael sat opposite Melissa. Harry turned to his father.

"Long," he replied honestly, as his goblet filled magically with orange juice. "The atmosphere in this castle is a tense one."

James nodded and scooped some mash potato onto his plate, passing the bowl on when he was done. "Sadly, no one has any fun

around here anymore," he sighed. "I remember back when we were at school, do you, Lily?"

Lily smiled. "How could I forget? You, Sirius, Remus, and Peter used to get into all sorts of trouble."

Harry thanked his sister, Melissa, as the plate of steaks came his way. "Yes," he smiled gently. "Remus told me a few of those stories back... back where I'm from."

James stared at the table in thought for a moment. "We should really catch up with Remus," he said eventually. "Hardly ever see him since he became the Head of the Auror division."

"Dumbledore asked him to come to the castle tomorrow," said Lily, cutting Michael's steak for him. "To arrange more protection around the castle."

James nodded. "Don't know why he's bothering. Voldemort can't get through the wards."

Harry swallowed a piece of meat and looked seriously at his father. "I wouldn't be so sure," he said. "There is always a way."

"Well he hasn't yet," Lily said quickly. "But let's talk about something else. Michael, how was Potions this morning?"

Michael shrugged and Harry saw that his black eye had cleared up perfectly. "Same as usual," he sighed. "Snape's a git."

James snorted into his goblet and Harry couldn't help but laugh. Michael smiled but Lily frowned. "You shouldn't anger him, Michael," she said. "He is fair if you stay on his good side."

Harry laughed again. "He docked me forty house points this afternoon for saying I didn't attack Malfoy."

"So that's where those points went," Melissa sighed, shaking her head. "You know we were in the lead before you lost them," she finished hotly.

"Melissa..." Lily warned quietly.

"No, it's okay," Harry sighed. "But I didn't attack Malfoy so I'm sure if you just tell McGona-" Harry stopped himself and frowned. He had slipped up there. Sirius was the head of Gryffindor house in this world, Minerva McGonagall was dead.

James jumped in quickly. "Hear you're going to play Quidditch this weekend," he said. "Ron Weasley said he was going to take you out last lesson, didn't he."

Harry shrugged. "Probably not. Everyone avoids me like the plague since Malfoy complained to his father."

"That's never good," Michael said, shaking his head.

The mood at the table fell a few notches as the conversation had wheeled itself back round to the war. It had infiltrated pretty much every aspect of everyone's life. Lily spoke next; "Well what do you like to do for fun?" she asked Harry.

Harry really had to think about that question. *Never had much time for it* he thought. "Quidditch is really all I've ever done over the past few years for fun," he said. "And that was cancelled last year."

"We'll get the brooms out ourselves this weekend then," James said. "Been a few years since I was up on one but it never leaves you."

"I can't stand them," Melissa said dismissively.

"Neither can I," Lily agreed.

"Just us lads then," James smiled, reaching over and slapping Michael on his back. "I'll see if Sirius wants to play, Remus as well if he's still here. We could get a team together and challenge one of the house teams, that'll draw a crowd as well."

Harry looked thoughtful for a moment. "Isn't there a game coming up for the cup anyway?" he asked.

James nodded. "Yeah but this could just be a *fun* event. I'm sure Dumbledore would go for it. Let's see, we've got five so far on our team... You Harry, Michael, Sirius, Remus, and myself.... What position you play, Harry?"

"Seeker..." Harry replied, draining his goblet.

"That's perfect!"

Lily smiled. "Oh look now, Harry. You've got him all excited."

"It'll be just the thing to relieve some of the tension around this place as well," James continued, whispering under his breath and thinking about Quidditch. "We should definitely do this."

"Can we do dinner first?" Lily asked sweetly, smiling at her husband. "Chocolate cake for dessert, anyone?"

All of them nodded the affirmative and with a wave of her wand Lily cleared the table. Another wave and a chocolate cake came floating through from the small kitchen in the back of their quarters. As Lily cut the cake, Harry turned to talk to Melissa. He sensed that the two of them were not getting on as well as they should be. Melissa seemed distant, she didn't trust him.

"So..." Harry said slowly. "You taking your OWLs this year then?"

"No," she cut in quickly. "I'm only in fourth year. In our world the OWLs are fifth year."

Harry corrected himself. "I thought you were a fifth year," he said.

"Nope, fourth."

"Here we are, Harry," Lily said, passing him a plate with a nice piece of rich chocolate cake upon it.

"Thanks," he whispered and sliced a bit off with the side of his fork.

"So you have DADA first thing tomorrow morning, Harry," James said. "We finished duelling and, well, you passed that aspect of the course in one shot, but what do you think I should teach next?"

"You're asking me!?" Harry exclaimed, momentarily shocked. "You're the teacher."

"I know, I know," James smiled. "But I think it safe to say you've got a bit of experience fighting the Dark Arts..." Harry nodded. "So what do you recommend?"

Harry fell into thought for a moment. There were many things he could have his father teach. He thought back to the lessons he had had in his own world with the DA, they had learnt some pretty useful stuff.

"Have you taught the Patronus charm yet?" he asked James.

"The Patronus! None of the sixth years could do that. We've only ever studied the theory; it was up to them if they wanted to try it in their spare time."

"Can you do it?"

James nodded and swallowed a piece of cake. "Corporeal griffin. How about you?"

*A griffin* thought Harry. *My dad can produce a Patronus that resembles my Animagus form, and I can produce one that resembles his.* That was an odd twist of fate. "A corporeal stag," Harry said, and James's eyes widened in understanding. "But I just call it Prongs."

Lily laughed gently and James smiled as memories of the four Marauders flooded his mind. "I guess I'm not so different from myself in your world then," James said.

"Except you're alive..." Harry whispered, and all at the table fell silent.

Michael ended the awkward silence. "The three Nimbus 2000 broomsticks should work well for the Quidditch on Saturday," he said, looking at Harry.

"They should," agreed James. "What did you ride in your world?" he then asked Harry.

"I was on a Firebolt," he replied, thinking of his beloved broom that Sirius had given him back in third year. He quickly thought of all the times he had used it, and remembered late last year when he had flown to Hogwarts after the destruction of Privet Drive and had an aerial battle with a group of Death Eaters. A

And when he had stolen one off of a Death Eater at the first Hogsmeade battle and flown into the clouds, only to come out screaming a few minutes later, his wand alight with destructive magic. Finally he remembered Dementors Trask using it to get to the second battle in Hogsmeade only a fortnight ago, and how he had saved Remus' life by swinging down and pulling him away from the torrent of flowing fire. *So many battles!*

"A Firebolt!" Michael cried, astounded. "How did it handle?"

"Expertly," Harry replied, looking down the table to see his mother and Melissa having a deep conversation. "But I was on a Nimbus before that, so I should be good."

"Great," agreed James. "We'll get them out tonight and polish them. We can go and see Dumbledore tomorrow."

"Who else could be on our team, Dad?" Michael asked excitedly. "What about one of my friends, Jenny maybe?"

James shrugged. "We'll see. Nothing's certain yet, but I'm sure Dumbledore would go for it."

The three of them fell silent as a new topic of conversation was searched for. Harry still felt slightly uncomfortable around his... family, but that was only natural considering he had never met them before three days ago. It was Michael, again, who ended the silence.

"I heard this good joke today," he said smiling. "It's about three hags who go into a bar and-"

James stopped him. "Is this bar in Knockturn Alley?" he asked suspiciously.

"You know this one!?" sighed Michael.

"I remember it from back in my day. I don't think it's very appropriate," James stated, the corners of his lips turning up into a smile.

"I remember it as well," Lily said, jumping back into the conversation. "Where did you hear that one, Michael?" she asked.

"Nowhere..." Michael said quickly, smiling mischievously and then coughed to clear the air. "How about you, Harry," he then said. "Do you know any good jokes?"

James, Lily, Michael and even Melissa looked at him expectantly, but Harry only sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "None besides the one I'm living..." he replied with a bitter, sad smile and took a final bite of his chocolate cake.

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"Good morning everyone," James said brightly. "Today we're going to be looking at the Patronus charm a lot more closely, and begin the practical work behind that charm."

Harry sat up the front on the far left of his Defence Against the Dark Arts class. This was a popular class and every seat was full, so Harry wasn't on his own this time. Seated to his left was Neville and on his right was Seamus. Neither was speaking to him and both were pretending he wasn't there, as Malfoy sat scowling across the room, and everyone knew the power and influence his father had.

"You don't expect us to actually manage a Patronus," Malfoy scoffed. "Only a handful of wizards can manage that."

James inwardly frowned. "If you believe it is beyond you, Mr. Malfoy," he said tightly. "You are welcome to leave." Malfoy's face flushed with anger but held his tongue. "Now, as I was saying. This can be done, more wizards and witches than you think have mastered this charm. It gets you points for Auror training," he finished enticingly.

Several excited whispered conversations sprung up across the room, and Harry fingered his wand within the folds of his black robes. Today was his third day back at Hogwarts, fifth and a half since he had arrived in this world, and he sensed a battle was coming. Little did he know it would be happening sooner than any of them could imagine.

"Now we studied the theory earlier this year," James continued. "You're all aware that this spell is fuelled by emotion. Only a truly happy thought, a strong undeniable pure thought can create a corporeal Patronus. Watch..." James took a few steps forward, down off the small stage on which his desk was situated and into what used to be the duelling area. Thinking of the day he married Lily, he raised his wand. "*Expecto Patronum!*" he cried, and instantly a massive white blur erupted from his wand like a tongue of hot white fire.

The Patronus grew and swirled around James impressively until it took form as a grand and masterful Griffin, which continued to circle James, leaving a silvery trail in its wake. Many of them had seen this earlier in the year so it wasn't that much of a surprise, but the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs still had admiration in their eyes as the Griffin dispersed, upon realising that there were no Dementors to fight.

James received a round of applause and took his place back up the front of the room. "See," he said. "Easy. A happy thought. Miss. Granger?"

Hermione had her hand raised to ask a question. "Professor," she began. "How do you know what your Patronus is going to resemble?"

"Well it can only be an animal," James answered. "No objects. Usually a Patronus resembles something important to the caster. Mine is a griffin, because of... well many reasons. Professor Black's is a dog. I guess that is to be expected really. And Remus Lupin's, the Head of the Auror division, his Patronus takes on the form of a wolf, because of his condition. Miss Granger again?"

"Professor, I read somewhere that a Patronus has more than one use, besides repelling Dementors."



"Indeed it does," nodded James. "It can be used to dispel a Lethifold, which is a nasty dark creature that hides in darkness. You'll see one of them in your seventh year."

The rest of the lesson was spent revising the theory behind the Patronus charm, and for a few people to try a brief attempt at conjuring the Patronus. Hermione was by far the best, managing a silvery mist that was thick enough to keep a solitary Dementor at bay.

When the siren went, James instructed the class to practice the Patronus for homework, and to think of some really happy thoughts. He also asked Harry to remain behind after everyone else had filtered out.

"How do you think that went?" James asked as Harry approached his desk.

"Fine," stated Harry. "Some of them made progress."

James nodded. "Yeah... anyway, sorry to keep you but...." James moved around his desk and picked up something from behind it. It was a broomstick, a shining Nimbus 2000, which he passed to Harry. "What do you think?" he smiled. "It's not a Firebolt but it'll do its job."

Harry held it out before him and let it go. It floated just at the right height for him and he smiled reminiscently. "Very nice..." he said.

"I thought we could go see Dumbledore now," James continued. "He's in his office and you'll only miss the beginning of Magical Creatures. What do you say? I'm really looking forward to playing some Quidditch again."

Harry laughed. "Let's go."

"Great," said James, locking his desk draw with a wave of his wand. "Let's go see the old man. Bring the broom."

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"Today we purge our world's finest magical institution of the unworthy and all those who stand in the way of our goal. Today the world will

know the price of defying the Dark Lord. Today, you chosen one hundred will lead the charge against Hogwarts castle."

Voldemort surveyed the crowd of Death Eaters before him from his position above them all, standing in front of his throne in the darkest, largest hall of Slytherin fortress. The Death Eaters cheered as he spoke of the coming fight, only a few minutes away.

"Prepare for Apparation to the road that leads from Hogwarts to Hogsmeade. I will bring down the wards before we make another move from there."

There were nods of approval and agreement from the assembled Death Eaters and they began to move and mingle amongst themselves as Voldemort sat back down on his throne to survey them.

"You will lead a separate mission to Azkaban," Voldemort then whispered to a cloaked figure on his left. "The release of my Death Eaters went expertly. No one suspected anything."

"I would rather accompany you on this mission against Hogwarts," the figure whispered in a deep, gravelly voice that belied his age.

Voldemort waved his hand dismissively. "Do not argue with this command. Hogwarts and Dumbledore is not your concern."

"What of this Harry Potter?" questioned the dark figure. "You destroyed him."

Voldemort raised a hand to his chin thoughtfully. "If it is indeed the boy, I will learn what I can and destroy him again. Now prepare for your task."

"Yes, father," the figure said, sinking away into the shadows.

Voldemort remained seated in his throne for a few more minutes, as he contemplated his next move. His main concern was Dumbledore, but the man was getting old, he believed he could best him. "To Hogwarts," he eventually said, and all of the Death Eaters bowed respectively, before, as one, they apparated to the road.

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"Good morning, gentlemen," Dumbledore welcomed Harry and James warmly. "What can I do for you today?"

"Morning, Dumbledore," James replied and Harry nodded. "We have come with an idea!"

"Ah!" smiled the wizened headmaster. "A most wonderful thing. Tell me, what is this idea? Does it have anything to do with the broomstick young Harry possesses?"

"It does," laughed James. "We would like your permission to have a Quidditch match. A team that I have put together, against one of the house teams this weekend."

Dumbledore fell into thought for a moment. "Well I see no reason why not," he said. "An excellent and admirable idea, James. Who do you have in mind for your team?"

James shrugged. "Michael, Sirius, and Harry are all we've got so far. I was going to ask Remus later this afternoon, but he might not want to."

Dumbledore stood up and moved around his desk, as Fawkes shrieked loudly and unexpectedly. It surprised them all and Dumbledore's face turned unflinchingly serious.

"What does that mean?" asked Harry quickly, slinging the Nimbus over his shoulder and sitting down on the large box next to the paned glass window that looked out over the forest.

"Danger approaches," Dumbledore and James said in unison.

"Fawkes has a sixth sense of these things," Dumbledore continued quickly. "James, inform the Auror-"

"Too late," Harry whispered quietly. He had turned to look out of the window and now saw a mass of black in the distance on the road to Hogsmeade. It was an army of Death Eaters marching on the castle. A fight had finally come. "They're on our doorstep," he finished.

"James, the Auror Headquarters. Use my floo, I'll sound the alarm," Dumbledore said quickly.

Harry stood and dropped his broom. ""What abo-"

**BOOM!**

No sooner had Harry stood than a massive bang erupted and rang across the entire castle and grounds. It shook the castle's foundations and knocked Harry off his feet as several of Dumbledore's meticulous instruments crashed to the floor around him. Looking back out of the window, he could see that the sky had turned a deep, silvery-green that sparkled dangerously.

He instantly knew it was the wards of the castle.

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Voldemort apparated to the head of his army just outside the range of the Hogwarts wards. As he had expected, a group of Aurors were on guard at the entrance to the castle only fifteen feet away. They did not put up much of a fight as the one hundred Death Eaters advanced on the castle.

As they grew closer to the castle, Voldemort could feel the ancient pull of the light magic preventing him from progressing any further. He scowled but then smiled deeply as the words in Salazar Slytherin's ancient text came back to him.

*The wards of my school are impregnable. No force in this world could break them, save one. My own blood. Slytherin I am, a key is hidden within the wards that will tear open a hole long enough for anyone to enter the grounds. Only my blood will activate this key though, it will be another secret held by my noble line.*

As soon as the deep blue light of the wards ensnared him, Voldemort produced a dagger from within the folds of his dark robes. Having trespassed on the ancient wards, they became visible to all that beheld them. A deep, sparkling blue dome encased the castle and protected it from the strongest evil of the magical world.

From outside it looked like a giant cocoon, of which the castle and the grounds within this dome were only just visible in a hazy blue hue. Marvelling at the genius that had gone into constructing this protection, Voldemort brought the dagger to the palm of his hand and slashed it across his palm, creating a long, bloody cut that pooled in his upturned hand.

Without another moments hesitation, he reached out with his bloody hand and touched the blue dome. It happened instantly, a massive boom rang out for miles around the surrounding area and the very ground shook as the blue dome turned a dark green. Voldemort smiled triumphantly as his Death Eaters marched past him unhindered. It was only too easy, he had already won.

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After the initial shockwave of the eruption was over, Harry got back to his feet and ran to the window. He looked out of it just in time to see a giant hole tear open in the green dome of the wards and the first line of Death Eaters march in. Looking up into the sky, Harry saw that the wards were disappearing again, but the damage had been done.

*Voldemort and the Death Eaters were inside the castle grounds.*

Harry turned back to Dumbledore, just as a loud ringing sound assaulted his ears. "They broke through the wards!" he shouted over the commotion, just as his father disappeared in a blur of green flames towards the Ministry.

"No..." Dumbledore whispered under his breath, but then got back to the job at hand. "Harry!" he called. "This alarm means that all students have to get to the Great Hall." Sounds of curses and of screams could be heard outside of the window, all the way down towards Hagrid's cabin.

Harry ignored Dumbledore and turned back once again to the window. He looked out of it towards the sound of the curses and he felt his blood run cold as he beheld the grounds. The Death Eaters were marching up towards the castle, but a large portion of them had broken away from the main force and was blocking Hagrid, and the

sixth year Care of Magical Creature class from making it back into the relative safety of the castle.

About fifty Death Eaters were advancing along the length of the forest towards the cabin, raining down spells and curses upon the helpless class. Harry felt his anger boil up inside of him as he saw this.

"Dear Merlin," breathed Dumbledore as he himself beheld the situation on the grounds. "Never in one thousand years has an enemy breached the castle wards. Hagrid is..."

Not wasting another second, Harry made his decision to fight. "Get the Aurors here," he told Dumbledore quietly, and then picked up the Nimbus 2000 he had just recently dropped.

"Harry..." Dumbledore began warningly. "What are you-"

"Those are my classmates out there," Harry replied in a tone that left no room for argument, as he stepped up to the huge window that looked out over the grounds. He realised as he grasped the broom tightly, that this window didn't open. It was so high up it was designed to remain permanently closed. "Make sure the Aurors come soon," he said, raising his wand. "*REDUCTO!*" he cried and a jet of red light exploded from his wand and hit the window with an explosive force.

The glass and wooden frame in the window was disintegrated into nothing as it smashed and came under the assault and searing heat of Harry's reductor curse. Dumbledore realised a moment too late what Harry was about to do, and he reached forward to grab his robes.

Harry dodged the headmaster's hand and turned towards the window. Showing and feeling absolutely no fear, he ran and took a leaping jump off of the sill and out into the open air, broom still in hand. Now Harry had just leapt out of one of the tallest towers at Hogwarts, it was rivalled only by the Astronomy tower and it was a decision that only a few would have ever made.

Wasting no time in his quick free fall, Harry slung the broom underneath him as the brick of the tower whirled by and the wind howled in his ears. Harry saddled the broom but kept its nose pointed

towards the stone courtyard now only one hundred and twenty feet beneath him. Breathing a sigh of relief that his little stunt had so far worked, Harry felt his velocity increase as he now dived towards the earth on his broom.

The ground approached fast and Harry was moving so quickly that he actually flew through a few pieces of splintered wood and glass that had fallen before him from the destroyed window of the headmaster's office. Grasping the handle tightly, and praying that he didn't overshoot his landing area, Harry pulled up sharply on the broom and instantly, before he could even blink, he was flying over the grounds and towards Hagrid's cabin and the sixth years shielded behind it.

The broom rocketed through the air, faster than this Nimbus model had ever been pushed or designed to fly. Though to be fair it wasn't designed for what Harry had just used it for. In six brief seconds Harry saw the cabin approaching and he lowered his altitude so he was just a blur flying low above the freshly cut spring grass.

Taking a deep breath and slowing to a stop after his death defying flight, which Harry realised had only taken about twenty seconds; he leapt off the broom just in front of Hagrid's cabin, the adrenalin pumping through his veins astoundingly.

"HARRY POTTER!" shouted Ron Weasley, and Harry looked up to see the sixth years being ushered towards the forest by Hagrid.

Looking over to the fifty or so Death Eaters heading his way, Harry dodged a few curses that smashed into Hagrid's cabin, shattering the windows and destroying the brick. He looked back to the huddled and confused class of about forty, including Hagrid, and then finally he looked back towards the castle doors. He knew he had to get them back inside the castle, to safety, but it meant fighting through the Death Eaters.

Despite that, Harry couldn't help but feel exhilarated. *Never a dull day* he thought briefly, as his magic began to manifest itself inside of him. His pure magic responding to the emotion of the battle he was now feeling. It began to surge through him in waves and all over his skin small blue sparks of power crackled like lightning.

Okay, he thought. *This is what you do. The saving-people thing!* Eyeing up the advancing group of Death Eaters again, Harry pooled some raw magic into his palms and created two glowing spheres of light.

*His first real fight in this world had now begun.*

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## Chapter 6 - Defying Our Demons

*He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster... when you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss also gazes into you.*

*~~Fridrich Nietzsche*

Okay, he thought. *This is what you do. The saving-people thing!* Eyeing up the advancing group of Death Eaters again, Harry pooled some raw magic into his palms and created two glowing spheres of light.

*His first real fight in this world had now begun.*

Harry thought fast. The Death Eaters were only about seventy feet away now, and the rest of them were already heading towards the castle entrance, which would cut them off entirely. What he needed to do was distract the Death Eaters coming his way, while at the same time race back to the castle with the forty or so students behind him.

The spheres of magic in his hands were white hot and that gave Harry an idea. He saw that Hagrid had gathered everyone behind his cabin, which was still under the assault of the approaching Death Eater's curses, but it kept them safe for now. Seeing he had one small chance, Harry called to Hagrid.

"HAGRID!" he called, and the half-giant ran over to him.

"You tha' Potter?" he asked.

Harry nodded. "Listen," he said. "I'm going to create some protection. When I say so, you all have to run to the castle, fast as you can."

"We'll be cu' ter ribbons!" Hagrid exclaimed, but Harry shook his head and turned back to the Death Eaters.

Harry broke out into a run towards the fifty or so enemies. Dodging a few of the shower of curses that rained down upon him, Harry threw his hands together and the two magical spheres combined into one, deep red ball. With a cry, Harry threw the sphere high into the air, it

crackled and sparkled as it went, and then turned on his heel and ran back towards Hagrid.

"READY!" he shouted, and Hagrid nodded. Harry was his only option right now, and if he said he could get them up to the castle, then he had no one else to turn to. The sixth years were staring fearfully at the Death Eaters, but many of them were also staring at Harry and the sphere of red light that hung suspended in the air.

Running back around to the safety of the cabin, Harry watched the sphere for a moment. Then, with a wave of his hand, he let it fall. "GO NOW!" he cried over the sound of the Death Eater's curses. "TO THE CASTLE."

"Come on now!" Hagrid began to usher the students out from behind his cabin, just as the red sphere of Harry's magic collided with the ground. It became clear almost instantly, what Harry's distraction was.

The red ball exploded with the awesome force of raw magic and the grass and small plants in the surrounding area in a fifteen foot radius caught fire. Because it was coming up summer, the grass was incredibly dry and it had just been freshly cut, so big piles of flammable refuse littered the area Harry had just set on fire.

It took quickly, the flames spreading and thick, billowing clouds of smoke rising from the green wood and storks. The flames spread so fast along the grass that the smoke began to obscure the view of the Death Eaters, and Hagrid couldn't help but smile as he and the forty or so teenagers ran out from behind his cabin. *If they couldn't see the Death Eaters, then the Death Eaters couldn't see them.*

The race was now on for the castle though, which was roughly eight hundred feet away, or two hundred and fifty metres, and the two separate Death Eater forces were both converging on them and their goal. They were going to be right on top of each other the whole way.

"RUN! RUN!" Harry shouted as his classmates, with no one else to follow and nothing they could possibly do on their own, obeyed and broke out in a sprint towards the castle. "DRAW YOUR WANDS!"

The billowing smoke clouds did impair the Death Eaters vision, but they were close enough now to do some real damage. Harry ran in between his fire and friends, and was the first to realise that the Death Eaters were not stopped by the flames. When they came, they came thick and fast. Anticipating their move, curses now came shooting through the flames, fired blindly by the group of Death Eaters.

Harry jumped straight into the fray though and began deflecting as many curses as he could away from the group, and at the same time construct shields to give them more of a fighting chance.

Ron and Hermione ran near the back of their Magical Creatures class, and watched in untold amazement as Harry Potter deflected curse after endless curse, fired from unseen wands behind the smokescreen. He had clearly already saved the lives of a dozen of them from the sounds and shouts of the curses coming their way.

Running up and over a small rise in the grounds left them visible for a moment and Harry conjured the strongest shield he could now that they had left the relative safety of his fire. A dozen harmful curses impacted against his hazy blue shield, but it held.

"Come on now!" bellowed Hagrid, ushering the students under his care on. He had also seen Harry's brief display of power, and it made him believe that they just might get out of this alive.

Deflecting another three curses and sending them shooting up into the clear blue sky, Harry took a deep breath and assessed the situation as best he could. They were about half way there. The fire and smoke he had created had given them enough time to put some real distance between the Death Eater horde and their curses, but that protection was gone now and the only thing keeping his classmates alive was the strength of his shield and deflection spells.

The other group of Death Eaters, the group that had marched up the castle driveway towards the double entrance doors, was closer to the castle than Harry and his group were. But they were not moving as fast. At their current rate, Harry would reach the castle first, but only just and it would not be unhindered. Both groups of Death Eaters

would probably be on his heels by the time he made it back, if he made it back...

And there was also one question that burnt furiously in Harry's mind, and did slightly distract him from the task at hand. *Where was Voldemort...?* Harry knew without a doubt that the Dark Lord was in the grounds. Only he could have damaged the wards, and he would want to be here to see Hogwarts fall. *Yeah...* Harry thought. *That is not going to happen!*

Harry swore as a Killing Curse hit his shield and it shattered into a thousand magical sparks, falling down like snow in a blizzard upon the retreating students. Thankfully, the curse was too high to hit anyone, but the message was clear enough. *The Death Eaters were going for the kill.*

"FASTER!" cried Harry, and most did put on a valiant burst of speed, but a few were falling behind. With a cry of energy, Harry extended his deflection net and new shield to a wider range so as to keep the group covered, but he knew it wouldn't last long. At his best guess, they were about one minute away from the castle doors and had about three hundred feet, one hundred metres ahead of them. It might as well have been a mile.

Sighing in frustration, Harry increased his deflection magic with a tremendous cry of power. They were now close enough to the other group of Death Eaters, that both forces were now raining down curses upon them. The noise was deafening as Harry's shield fell again under the barrage of searing curses. Abandoning the shield, Harry focused all his efforts into deflecting the dozens of deadly curses that flared magnificently towards them across the wide expanse of the Hogwarts grounds, which had become a battlefield on which Harry was the only opposing force to the Death Eater onslaught.

Glancing over his shoulder as he ran along the length of the group, Harry let a pain curse slip through as he deflected a dozen others. This curse hit Hagrid square in the chest. The half-giant screamed, but bit his lip and didn't fall. He carried on running, pushing others before him and standing in between his students and the curses.

The castle doors were flung open as they closed the gap even further, and Harry sighed with relief as he beheld a wall of friendly spells issue forth from the top of the steps, as the Hogwarts professors joined the fight. Dumbledore stood at the front, and he cast a powerful knock back jinx, which knocked a fair portion of the advancing army off their feet, hindering their progress up to the castle and giving Harry and his group the time they desperately needed.

*We're almost there!* Harry thought with relief. Dumbledore worked his magic again, and for a few brief seconds the barrage of curses being fired at Harry and his friends ceased. A few more Death Eaters fell as they were stunned by the other members of staff.

With the smell of burning grass and smoke in their nostrils, and the sound of an unexpected battle all around them, Harry, Hagrid, and the forty or so teenagers finally reached the castle, just as a blasting curse managed to get through Harry's deflection net.

Harry watched it sail past him almost gracefully, before it slammed into the earth behind him, throwing him and one of the other students to the ground. Hagrid and the rest were now running into the safety of the castle, as Dumbledore and the other Professors provided some much needed cover.

Getting to his feet, Harry shook his head and began to move in a disorientated manner as he was still reeling from the blow of the blasting curse. He looked to the approaching Death Eaters and then up to the castle steps, where his parents were waving at him to run towards them. Also, he saw Ron behind Snape, having to be dragged into the castle. Harry nodded, and almost set off at a run towards his parents when he heard an ear-piercing scream.

Looking back again, he saw a single Hogwarts student lying with her back to the ground, screaming as the Death Eaters took careful aim at her. Harry realised instantly that he was not the only one knocked down in the blast of only a few moments ago. He did break into a run this time, but away from the castle and towards his fallen friend, towards Hermione.

His heart pounding in his chest, Harry threw himself at Hermione's fallen form, just as one of the nearby Death Eaters cast the most

unforgivable of curses. All of the professors watched from the castle entrance stairs, holding their breath as Harry fell through the air towards Hermione, and the green light of death nipped at his heels.

Harry fell hard, wrapping his arms around Hermione's waist and pulling her up and over him as they rolled out of the line of fire. They kept rolling, just as the killing curse exploded where Hermione had lain only a small second ago. Dirt and debris was thrown into the air and Harry felt the coldness of the curse on the back of his neck. Fear in her eyes, Hermione swallowed and allowed herself to be pulled to her feet by Harry.

"RUN!" Harry shouted and turned to face the approaching Death Eaters, who stood now barely ten feet away. Hermione didn't need telling twice, and as Harry began to conjure some powerful offensive magic, she made another break for the castle.

Dumbledore and the others provided protection for her, as Harry began to lay into the Death Eater lines, walking back towards the castle himself. "*Vestit*!" he cried, and a purple light erupted from both his palms, killing two Death Eaters. Shaking his head, knowing it was either them or him, Harry fired three reductor curses at the ground in front of the Death Eaters, who had begun to split up into smaller groups as they were too big of a target as one.

Harry's reductor curses destroyed one Death Eater and sent another three flying back over the heads of others. Fire in his eyes and magic in his palms, Harry slowly deflected some dangerous curses as he struggled back to the castle. He knew Hermione would have made it by now, and the Death Eaters to his far left were no hassle as Dumbledore and the other teachers were keeping them at bay.

Harry dodged a Cruciatus Curse but this put him in line with a Killing Curse. Thinking fast, he pulled another Death Eater towards him through the air with thought magic, and placed him in front of the Avada Kedavra, as a shield. He was dead before he hit the ground.

Harry could hear his mother and father calling for him now, he was so close. But the Death Eaters were almost just as close. Calling more raw magic to his palms, pooling it together into spheres, Harry repeated his earlier display of power. He threw his hands together

and tossed the ball of raw magic to the ground, just in front of the main Death Eater advancement.

This moment of distraction allowed a cutting charm to get through his defences though, and Harry winced as his cheek was cut open, splattering his face and neck with blood. But there was no follow up curse, as that was when his explosive ball of power hit. The sound of the explosion was devastating, as were the effects. Harry was thrown back; onto the castle steps and all the Death Eaters nearby were thrown back as well.

Standing up and coughing heavily, as the blast had nearly winded him, Harry began to walk painfully up the stairs, relying on the protection of Dumbledore and the other Professors as he went. Reaching the top of the stairs and safety, Harry turned again and looked out a final time at the sea of Death Eaters, and beheld the trail of destruction he had wrought to get everyone back here safely.

The Death Eaters were still splitting into separate groups and converging on the castle, but Harry took a deep breath and looked at the fires he had started on the way up here. Most of them were still burning, and the grounds were falling under a smoky haze as there was an ample supply of fuel for the flames. Shaking his head, Harry began to turn when he saw something out of the corner of his eye. Standing on the steps, he was above the Death Eaters and protected from behind, but as such he could see right over the army. A lone figure stood silently and unmoving behind the Death Eaters, two red pinpricks of light shining out from beneath his hood.

Harry knew it was Voldemort. And for a moment all his wits and common sense left him as they were replaced by a deep hatred and anger. Harry would have jumped right back down the stairs, if it wasn't for the strong pair of hands that grabbed him from behind, and pulled him into the castle.

Wincing as his shoulder was disturbed by his father's strong gasp, Harry and James collapsed just inside the Entrance Hall as Dumbledore and Sirius threw the castle doors shut and began to place protective charms upon them.

Coughing and breathing heavily, Harry's head swam as he struggled to stand up, and the doors began to shake under the assault of the Death Eater's magic. "Is everyone all right?" he asked, looking around to see if anyone was injured.

"Harry..." James whispered. "That was unbelievable. You just... just took on a hundred Death Eaters alone."

Harry turned to his father and offered him a hand to get up. James took it and Harry pulled him up off the floor. "Where are the Aurors?" he then asked. "Weren't you getting them?"

"They're mobilising right now. Remus will be here within ten minutes."

Harry nodded as everyone began to surround him. Lily reached out and hugged him, but Harry broke away quickly, looking over to the Great Hall, where he saw through the open doors the entire school was seated. Near the stairs were Hagrid and the sixth years he had just saved. Hermione was being comforted by Ron, as she was openly crying and the others were looking around fearfully, clearly at a loss as to what to do.

"They shouldn't be here..." Harry whispered, and then repeated it a little louder. "Dumbledore," he said, turning to the headmaster who was enforcing the protection on the doors. "Everyone needs to get back to their common rooms."

Dumbledore left Sirius to continue warding the door and walked over to Harry. "Your power is beyond impressive, Harry," he began, "but leave the well-being of the students to me. Now, I want you to go and join your classmates."

Harry shook his head. "I knew you'd say that," he said. "You don't trust me!" It wasn't a question.

"I did not say that," Dumbledore argued gravely, as the high windows were shattered and glass rained down upon them.

"Remus better hurry," Sirius growled as the doors shook and splintered.



"You didn't have to," Harry shot back at Dumbledore. "Look... those Death Eaters out there are coming in, whether we like it or not. Having the entire school population seated in one place, right next to their entrance isn't very smart, is it?"

Lily stepped forward. "I think we should listen to him, Albus," she said slowly and James backed up his wife, and his son.

Harry wiped some blood out of the corner of his mouth. His cheek bled profusely from the one cutting charm that had hit him, and the entire left side of his face and neck was red from the blood. But Dumbledore sighed and nodded.

"Order them back to their common rooms," Harry said quickly, above the noise from outside. "Have them barricade themselves in."

Dumbledore looked into Harry's eyes for a moment, before conceding. "Sirius, Severus, Lily. Make sure it's done."

As soon as this was said, Dumbledore turned back to the doors and began to reinforce them. Sirius, Snape and Lily ran over into the Great Hall, as Harry healed the cut on his face with a small healing charm. He then ran over to Ron and Hermione, and the other sixth years.

"Head back to the common room," he told them. "It'll be safer there. Go now..."

Most of them did obey, having faith in Harry now that he would protect them, but Hermione hesitated. "Are you coming with us?" she asked.

Harry shook his head. "No. I'm going to go deal with Voldemort."

"Come on, Hermione," Ron said, pulling on his girlfriend's arm. "Harry here seems to know what he's doing."

Hermione bit her bottom lip, and allowed herself to be pulled up the stairs as the rest of the school began to filter out of the Great Hall. Ron gave the smallest of nods and thanks to Harry, Harry returned it and then turned back to the castle doors. Hundreds of scared and

confused looking first, second, and third years ran past Harry as he battled against the tide of students to reach Dumbledore.

The castle walls shook under the constant barrage of so many curses, and Harry began to prepare himself, in case the Death Eaters did manage to break in. After some struggling, Harry reached Dumbledore and set about adding his own strength to the splintering massive wooden doors.

"HE'S OUT THERE!" Harry shouted, above the noise of the stampeding students and the endless noise of the destructive curses.

"Was there ever any doubt?" Dumbledore replied, smiling forlornly.

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw the other professors ushering the children up the stairs as one of the ancient bricks in the wall to Harry's right cracked under the immense power of the Killing Curse. The doors groaned on their hinges and Harry summoned up all his strength into a force charm that would equal the pressure being pushed upon the doors from outside, balancing out the strain.

"*Sestum Forderius!*" Harry said, remembering being taught this curse in his own world by Thomas Fright, his Auror curse instructor. The doors ceased their groaning, but the slightest tilt in the balance of power would blow them off their hinges.

"I fear you may have only just bought us a few brief minutes, Harry," Dumbledore stressed, his own arms aching against the strain of the power being flung at the castle doors.

"A few minutes is all the Aurors need," he replied, turning around to see the last few students run up the Entrance Hall stairs. It was now only the Hogwarts Professors in the Entrance Hall, as well as Harry, Lily and Madam Pomfrey. And for a moment the heat of the battle had abated, as the Death Eaters tried relentlessly to break the magic on the doors.

"So..." said Harry, leaning against the wall to catch his breath, and rest his shoulder which was burning terribly. "Any guesses on how he got past the wards?"

Many in the Hall shook their heads, even Snape, who had not been privy to any information concerning this attack. Dumbledore gave a fairly accurate guess though, as there was a respite on the bombardment of the doors. "To repeat a well-used phrase once again," the ancient wizard began, smiling remorsefully. "I believe Voldemort came in through the backdoor."

Harry laughed slightly under his breath, but he was the only one that did. "What do you mean, Albus?" asked Professor Sinistra, the Astronomy scholar.

"There was a key in the wards," Harry said slowly. "Something that once activated, could let anybody in. Like an unprotected backdoor."

"Exactly, Harry," agreed Dumbledore. "An unknown weakness... in the strongest wards of our world."

"I bet we have Salazar Slytherin to thank for that," Sirius spat. "Bloody Dark Wizards..."

"Oh please, Black," Snape hissed. "If you believe that you may as well believe in the Chamber of Secrets myth!"

Harry laughed out loud at that one, and attracted many odd gazes from the staff present. "Is everything all right, Harry?" Lily asked gently, knowing that this was neither the time nor the place for such laughter.

"I'm fine," Harry replied, still giggling slightly. They all looked like they wanted to say something else, but Harry just shook his head and waved them away. It was then though, that a grave knocking sound was heard, and it took them all a moment to realise that it was the castle doors.

***KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!***

It was like a reverberating gong, obviously magical because of the strength needed to create a knocking sound on one of those massive doors. For a moment all of them were at a loss as to what to do. Except for Harry. "WHO IS IT?" he called, and James and Sirius couldn't keep the smiles off their faces.

Taking a few steps back from the door, a cold voice now rang out in an inhuman way. It pierced every corner of their minds, and sent shivers down their spines.

"Open the door, old man," hissed a voice of the purest evil.

Dumbledore's eyes narrowed, as did Harry's. "Three guesses who that is!" he whispered, as the sound of echoing breaking glass reached his ears.

Dumbledore raised his wand to his throat and cast a sonorus charm. "LEAVE THIS CASTLE, TOM!" he commanded. "THE AURORS ARE ON THEIR WAY."

"Let them come..." the unseen voice hissed again, and then a great burst of power was thrown at the doors, splintering them directly down and across their middle. James, Sirius, and Dumbledore jumped forward instantly, and began to restrengthen the dying doors.

Harry, meanwhile, had just processed something he had heard only a moment ago. *The sound of breaking glass*. Now that he thought about it, it had come from the Great Hall, which *should* have been empty. Removing his wand from his robes pocket, Harry grasped the smooth, polished wood firmly and carefully took a few slow steps towards the doors of the Great Hall, which stood wide open.

As he drew closer, Harry could definitely hear the sound of movement, and of boots crunching glass. He was now only a few feet away from the Hall entrance, on its right side. He could see the corner of the Slytherin table, which was deserted. The barrage of curses from outside was taking its toll on the main doors now, but Harry barely heard it.

He approached the Great Hall, just as his mother spotted him. "Harry," she said, taking a few swift steps over to her son. "What-"

Harry waved his hand and motioned for her to be quiet, and then with a running leap he jumped into the Great Hall, as Lily came up behind him. *SNAP!*

Lily screamed as the doors of the Great Hall closed just in front of her, separating her away from Harry. But she had seen enough to know that the Great Hall wasn't empty. It had at least ten Death Eaters in there. That was about how many she had seen before the doors had been magically sealed, forcing her to remain outside.

"HARRY!" she called, banging on the doors. "HARRY!"

Her screams attracted the attention of the other staff members. "JAMES!" Lily screamed. "DEATH EATERS- HARRY- TRAPPED."

But James, Dumbledore, and Sirius couldn't move. If one of them did, the castle doors would fall and a sea of Death Eaters would swarm in uncontrollably, as well as Voldemort. Lily realised this instantly, and drew her wand to blast away the Great Hall doors, and help Harry. "*REDUCTO!*" she cried, as Flitwick, Sinistra, Madam Hooch, Snape, Hagrid, and the other members of staff ran to her side.

Her curse hit the doors as it should, but it merely dissipated along its length, the magic and wards cast upon it preventing its destruction and opening. Lily tried again, frantically as the sounds of curses being fired from within the Hall reached her ears.

"It's no good, Lily," Flitwick said gravely. "It is a time delayed ward. Nothing can destroy it except the passage of time. We can't get in."

Lily sighed in frustration and even Snape tried to disable the ward on the door, knowing full well that only Dumbledore could probably do it, and he couldn't help them even though he was standing only thirty feet away. Whatever was going on in there, Harry Potter would have to deal with it on his own.

It was then, though, that several things happened all at once. One, the Aurors had arrived down at the castle gates, and were now racing up the field to meet the Death Eaters, and two, the castle doors exploded under the force of so much magic, and the battle spilled into the Entrance Hall, with James, Sirius, and Dumbledore at its head.

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Harry waved his hand and motioned for her to be quiet, and then with a running leap he jumped into the Great Hall, as Lily came up behind him. *SNAP!*

Harry fell into a dive as he heard the doors snap close behind him, and came up with his back to the end of the Ravenclaw table, and his wand pointed at the sealed doors. A wave of golden light passed over the brown wood and Harry knew instantly it was a ward, one that would prevent the doors being opened.

He stood and turned quickly, knowing what he was going to see. Sure enough, standing halfway down the Hall, in between and even on the house tables, was a row of unmoving Death Eaters. Harry counted fifteen in all, and each of them had their wand trained upon him.

Harry instantly raised his own wand, as a deep silence fell upon the Hall. Looking behind them and at the discarded broomsticks lying at their feet, Harry surmised that they had flown into the castle, smashing many of the panes of glass in the massive window of the Great Hall to get in.

Taking a deep breath, Harry took a few slow steps out from behind the table, and walked so they all could see him. None of them moved and none of them attacked, but Harry knew that some of them were pretty high ranking Death Eaters, as their masks were red as oppose to the regular white.

"Er... HI!" called Harry, his voice echoing in the vast emptiness of the Hall. He could smell the smoke from the burning grounds outside and looking up briefly at the enchanted ceiling, he saw that smoke was heavy in the sky, not very thick, but casting a haze over the bright spring sun.

One of the Death Eaters stepped forward, and Harry recognised the faint strands of blonde hair that hung out of his mask and hood. "Lucius Malfoy..." he said, loud enough for the approaching Death Eater to hear.

The man stopped moving, and motioned for the Death Eaters behind and to the left and right of him to keep their wands trained on the boy. He then removed his hood and mask, revealing himself. Harry was

right, the arrogant, pointed smirk of Lucius Malfoy, frowned down upon him as he took a few steps closer.

"You seem to know who I am," Malfoy began coldly. "And you remind me of that fool James Potter. Could you be... are you the seemingly immortal Harry Potter?"

Harry inclined his head slightly and Lucius smiled smugly. "I'm he," Harry replied, grinning.

"Hmm..." Lucius shrugged. "This was easier than expected. Found you without any trouble at all."

The muffled laughter of the other Death Eaters reached Harry's ears, as Malfoy smiled victoriously. "You are to come with us, boy. My Master demands your presence immediately!"

Harry shrugged. "I'll eventually get to him," he said, with the hint of a smile playing at his lips. "But first you guys are gonna have to go. Can't have you running around the castle."

Malfoy frowned, obviously not expecting such... sarcastic... defiance from a boy who should now be begging for his life. Lucius knew he must be bluffing, and raised his wand. He would stun this boy, and his master will kill him... again. "*STUPEFY!*" he cried.

Harry sighed and took a quick step to his left and up onto the bench of the Ravenclaw table, the deep red light of the stunner streaming past him like a bolt of red lightning. "Not on orders to kill me then?" Harry said, raising his eyebrows and smiling inwardly at the flush of anger that spread across Lucius Malfoy's face.

"Come quietly, boy," Malfoy growled. "And your death at the hand of the Dark Lord will be quick."

Harry shook his head and continued to smile. "That is not much incentive for me to come at all now, is it?"

The other Death Eaters now began to move forward, just as a massive bang echoed into the Hall from behind the warded doors. Harry knew the castle had just been breached, in more places than

one. He hoped Dumbledore and his parents could manage alone for a few minutes.

"Stun him, Lucius," came a cold, female voice from behind one of the twelve red masks.

Harry knew that voice, and pure magic sprung to his hands at the anger it summoned. "Bellatrix," he whispered dangerously, his skin crackling with little bolts of blue power.

"My, my, my," drawled Malfoy. "Quite educated for a dead man, Potter. You seem to know all of us..."

Harry was no longer listening. His eyes had narrowed to two deep, emerald green slits. He raised his wand and with a quick spell whispered underneath his breath, the summoning charm, all of the masks of the Death Eaters present were ripped away and flew through the air towards him.

Some of the Death Eaters cried out in surprise as their identities were revealed. Another wave of his wand and Harry banished the masks flying towards him, and got a good look at who he was about to fight.

There were a majority of the inner circle that he knew, others from pictures, and some he had never seen before in any context. From left to right stood Antonin Dolohov, who Harry remembered from the Department of Mysteries battle. He had nearly killed Hermione. Next in line were two Death Eaters, who had been in white masks, he didn't recognise. After that came Rodolphus Lestrangle and then Bellatrix Lestrangle. Rabastan Lestrangle was also there, one more from the Department of Mysteries. In the middle stood Lucius Malfoy, and right from him were Walden Macnair, another unknown Death Eater, one Harry knew only as Mulciber, Nott came next, and then Augustus Rookwood. And finally, standing to Rookwood's left, were Crabbe and Goyle, and an unknown man.

"Well the whole gang is here," sighed Harry, scratching the back of his neck and twirling his aching shoulder in small circles, to keep the circulation going.



"Impressive," Lucius Malfoy spat as the other Death Eaters recovered from the loss of their masks. "But enough, Potter. Surrender your wand or die!"

"The *entire* inner circle," breathed Harry, smiling excitedly. "I've been waiting for this for a long time."

"Enough," said Rookwood. "*Crucio!*"

Harry jumped out of the way of the curse and immediately went on the offensive. Talk was over. He could hear the sounds of battle outside, and knew that the Aurors must have arrived. He didn't know how strong they were, in numbers or magic, so he wanted to get out there, where Voldemort was.

"*Cusindeo!*" Harry retaliated against Rookwood, firing a bone breaking curse. The Death Eaters spread out and Harry's curse impacted against the Hufflepuff table, snapping it and destroying a big chunk of the wood, which splintered and whistled away, smacking against the hard stone of the floor.

"Spread out," ordered Lucius. "On my count, stunning spells." The fifteen Death Eaters spread out so they covered the Great Hall, forming a single line. They thought Harry would not be able to defend from an attack on such a long arc. "Now!" Malfoy cried. "*Stupefy!*"

Malfoy's wand exploded with red light, as the fourteen other Death Eaters simultaneously repeated the curse. Fifteen equal jets of red stunning light rocketed through the air towards Harry, upturning the goblets and bits and pieces of paraphernalia left lying on all of the house tables. It was like a river of red light, coming in on a one hundred and eight degree radius, directly towards Harry.

Harry, for his part, took a single step back and rose what looked like a simple shield charm. "*Protego!*" he whispered. The Death Eaters who were watching smiled as Harry's blue shield charm popped into existence. They knew that even one of their stunners would shatter it instantly.

Working fast as Harry knew he only had seconds. He subtly reinforced his shield charm to withstand the blow from all of the

stunners using pure magic, and then added a few new touches of his own devising, that Derris had taught him after a particularly vigorous sword training exercise back in his own world. He added a multiplier charm to the shield, as well as a counter charm and a heat seeking charm. If all went to plan the Death Eaters wouldn't have a chance. It was then that the stunners reached Harry.

The Death Eaters all smiled with premature victory. They had all been slightly unnerved by this boy's brief display of power, but if a protego shield charm was all he could manage then they had nothing to worry about.

Harry braced himself as he knew this was going to drain him of some power, and closed his eyes against the bright red light that exploded against his shield in a shower of sparks that nearly deafened him. All fifteen stunners hit his shield and the blue barrier turned a deep red and then a thousand golden stripes of light began to absorb the stunners. The Death Eaters eyes widened in momentary surprise as Harry disappeared behind this wall of red light.

Soon Harry's other spells took over though, the multiplier spell, designed to deflect a curse and send another *three* back at the original caster, multiplied all fifteen stunners into forty five stunners, whilst the counter charm began to throw them back upon the Death Eaters. Finally, the heat seeking charm allowed the stunners to hone in on the line of Death Eaters, who stood in disbelief as *forty five* stunners erupted from the shield wall and began to return upon them.

Harry stumbled and felt a wave of expected dizziness and nausea as he was drained of the magic required for forty five stunners. He almost fell, but if Harry had one thing it was power, and he recovered, only slightly weakened a few seconds later and smiled triumphantly. If the Death Eaters fifteen stunners had resembled a river of red light, then Harry's forty five stunners had to be called a flood, as they shot through the air.

But there was a nagging thought in the back of Harry's mind, as the Death Eaters rose whatever shields they could in the brief seconds they had left conscious, that he didn't feel as powerful as he had before his final battle in his own world. It was almost unexplainable,

but definitely undeniable. There was like a piece of his magic missing, which had been pure and powerful, but it was gone. Harry could think of only one reason why, and it shook him to his very core.

The Voldemort of his world had it. When he had jumped in front of and survived Voldemort's Killing curse, he had lost some of his power and it had transferred, along the string of the Avada Kedavra and into Voldemort. Harry knew it had almost killed both of them, as he had spoken with the Dark Lord within his mind one final time before he had portkeyed away. He had saved Hogwarts, his world that day, but he had also given its greatest enemy power that could destroy them all, and that no one in that world could match. Not even Albus Dumbledore.

So it was then, in the heat of battle as one hundred Death Eaters and the Dark Lord lay siege to the castle, and the Aurors fought for its freedom, and the Great Hall was bathed in the red light of forty five stunners, that Harry felt homesick. He was worried for the safety of the one place he couldn't enter for a year. His own world was defenceless against the wrath of an infinitely powerful Voldemort, as he fought for another world that had long since given up on hope.

Harry shook himself out of those thoughts though, as he had a job to do now. *Can only save one thing at a time...* he told himself, as his stunners exploded magnificently and like thousands of sparkling fireworks against the weak shields a handful of the Death Eaters had managed to raise.

Line after line of stunner fell upon the helpless Death Eaters, who had neither expected nor defended properly against such a barrage. Harry's vision of them was lost as everything glowed red and the heat of so much magic melted the metal of the goblets and cutlery on the house tables, which were also scorched from the sea of stunners.

The sound of bodies hitting the floor and tables reached Harry's ears as the red light began to disappear. The hot smell of magic was on the air and a single groan was heard from atop the Gryffindor table.

Harry walked slowly down between the house tables, staring at the slumped and broken forms of all of the Death Eaters, who had been so sure of themselves half a minute ago. Lying on top of his house

table though, was a Death Eater Harry had known all too well in his own world, in his other war.

Bellatrix Lestrange coughed and rolled over, having just managed to deflect the five stunners that had targeted her. She made to roll off the table but as she did, came face to face with the tip of Harry's wand. She glared and made no attempt to move, but looked up into the eyes of the boy who had just shamed them all.

"You going to finish us, Potter?" she asked coldly. "Finish me?"

Harry showed no emotion as he summoned a glowing curse to the tip of his wand, watching the red light of it reflected in Bellatrix's eyes. Unlike the Bellatrix in his world, Harry noticed, this one had not spent time imprisoned in Azkaban, and her considerable good looks were not diminished. As like the living Sirius here, she held the beauty that was almost seen in every member of the Black family. Harry knew it was a cruel beauty though, and his hatred for Bellatrix was only topped by his pure hatred for Tom Riddle.

"You deserve to die," Harry whispered emotionlessly, the only sign of his anger was the fire in his emerald eyes. "For the evils you have committed in more than one world."

Bellatrix frowned. "What are you talking about?" she asked viciously.

Harry moved his head slightly and his eyes glazed over. "Nothing, Bellatrix," he said quietly, sniffing. "Just be thankful I don't find pleasure in taking lives, even yours. *Stupefy!*"

The stunner sent Bellatrix spinning and she landed on the floor on the other side of the table hard. Harry sighed and put his wand away, his hand shaking from the anger he felt. He walked slowly back towards the doors of the Great Hall, his eyes and mind reflecting a storm of emotion. As he approached the doors, he waved his hand and the golden ward upon it shattered and the doors flew open, revealing a very frightened James and Lily Potter.

Harry walked out of the Hall to greet them, and Lily took one look behind him into the Hall, and at the slumped bodies of so many Death Eaters, and she looked back questioningly at Harry who, apart from

the dried blood on his cheek and neck from a deep cut, was unscathed. "Wha... how...?" she managed.

Harry shrugged and rubbed his sore shoulder. "Did not know who they were messing with," he said simply, as his mother and father looked on at him in awe, and all the sounds of battle outside ceased ominously, and the only sound heard was that of a high pitched evil laughter.

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### *Fifteen Minutes Earlier*

"Come on, Ron," cried Hermione as they reached the second floor corridor with a throng of other students behind him.

"I'm coming-" Ron said, but suddenly stopped in his tracks, as he beheld the Hogwarts grounds from a nearby window. "Bloody hell..." he breathed. "Does anybody else see this?" he asked slowly.

The movement for the common rooms came to a stop as the students of Hogwarts spread out along this corridor and others that looked out upon the grounds, to witness the battle between the Death Eaters and the recently arrived Aurors, who were now running to meet each other in the centre of the field. The Death Eaters were coming from the castle entrance, whilst the Aurors were coming up from the castle gates. They would meet in the middle, as the grounds still burnt from the flames that Harry Potter had started and fed.

"Oh my..." whispered Ginny Weasley, standing next to Hermione as the corridor fell eerily silent. "Is that... is that..."

At the head of the advancing Death Eater party was a single figure, dressed entirely in black.

"That's You-Know-Who," Ron said, and gasps of fear reverberated along the corridor.

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James, Sirius, and Dumbledore cried out in pain as the castle doors exploded around them. They recovered quickly though, and raised shield charms against the curses they expected to be coming their way, but none did. Outside they could see that the Death Eaters had abandoned the doors and were running once again down the grounds towards...

"REMUS!" James and Sirius shouted in unison, jumping up and down on the spot. "You gotta love that furry little guy," continued Sirius.

"Gentlemen," Dumbledore said, clearing his throat. "We should join the fight." Then the headmaster bounded down the steps with speed that belied his age, leaving the others to follow in his wake.

James nodded and took a deep breath, turning to see what his colleagues were doing, and frowning when he saw Lily beating upon the door of the Great Hall.

"It's Harry," she said. "He's trapped in there with Death Eaters."

"Damn it," cursed Sirius.

"It's a time delayed ward," Snape whispered, heading away from the Great Hall and towards Sirius. "We can't break it, and Dumbledore has already left."

"WE HAVE TO DO SOMETHING!" cried Lily, somewhat hysterically. "I can't lose him again..."

James felt a pang of guilt that was so familiar. He had felt it the past six years, ever since he had been unable to save the life of their Harry from Voldemort in Diagon Alley. And as the other professors ran past him and out onto the grounds for a fight, James walked over and embraced his wife, who was now crying.

"Come on," he whispered, kissing her forehead. "I'll stay. Let's get him out of there."

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Remus Lupin ran up the grounds at the head of sixty five Aurors, dressed in their bright, light-representing robes. They showed no fear as the forces of the Dark Lord descended down from the castle towards them, and had faith in their leader that they could win this fight.

Remus still marvelled that he had been given this job at all. Graduating from Hogwarts was one of the proudest moments of his life, but afterwards no one wanted to employ him anywhere because he was a werewolf. He wasn't trusted as the Dark war stretched on for two decades, and then only a year ago the head of the Auror division position had been filled twice, but both men had subsequently died at the hands of Death Eaters. Having extensive training in duelling from his work within the Order, Remus applied for the job on Dumbledore's advice and was head of the department a week later.

No one else had wanted the job, but to this day Remus was the longest surviving head of the division, and had long since earned the trust and respect of the men and women who served underneath him.

Remus raised his hands and ordered the Aurors to assume an offensive position, as he caught sight of the Wizarding world's worst fear standing at the head of his army. Swallowing nervously, Remus began to ignore his fear, as there would be brief negotiations before the inevitable battle.

Sure enough, the Dark Lord ordered that his Death Eaters assume an equal position and then moved forward into the space in between the two separate forces, into what is known as no mans land.

A quick count of the numbers told Remus that the Death Eaters outnumbered them by about fifteen, which wasn't a remarkable difference really. But they had Voldemort at their front and Remus knew he was absolutely no match for the Dark Lord, and would need Dumbledore, who was probably protecting the castle.

The Aurors watched as Lord Voldemort stepped away from his Death Eaters and took the standard twenty five paces towards Remus, which was the expected minimum in Wizarding warfare.

"You sure about this?" whispered Remus' second-in-command, Kingsley Shacklebolt. "You know he likes to put on a show. We should just attack..."

Remus ran a hand through his hair but held his wand tightly. "There is going to be a fight here today, but I have to try and prevent it. That's my job."

"He'll kill you!" Kingsley warned.

Remus smiled sadly. "If he does you'll know the negotiations weren't overly successful," he said, and then began to walk the minimum required paces. Kingsley swore under his breath, but he couldn't help but admire the courage their leader possessed.

Remus felt weak to his very knees as he approached the embodiment of fear. A man that could inspire terror a hundred times worse than that of a Dementor. A man that had held the world at war for twenty years. A man... no... A monster that was slowly winning that war. When Remus came to a stop, both sides fell silent so as to hear what was said. Voldemort and Lupin stood roughly ten feet apart, as both sides held their ground.

"Good morning, Werewolf," hissed Voldemort, his red eyes glinting with malice.

Remus couldn't help but shudder at the coldness in that voice. "Lord Voldemort," he began. "Cease your actions or the Ministry of Magic will be forced to neutralise you and your followers by any means necessary." Remus knew it was a rehearsed, by the book, response, but he was just stalling for time.

Voldemort ignored what he had said. "You, werewolf, should not be standing against me. By right you are my natural ally. Join my forces now and you will be spared."

Remus stared into that pale white face that reduced grown men to tears, and couldn't help but feel angry by what had been said. He was a werewolf, but not a dark creature. He controlled his transformation every month, and would never serve the dark.



"Don't let good people die today over the purity of blood," Lupin managed quietly, not really believing he was trying to negotiate with the Dark Lord. In his one year as leader of the division, never once had he spoken directly to Voldemort. Dumbledore had been there the only other time the Dark Lord had come out to fight with his army, and he had done all the talking.

"This school will be purged, traitor," hissed Voldemort. "As will the world. Prepare to die!"

Remus immediately fell into a defensive position, but the Dark Lord merely spun on his heel, black robes billowing out behind him impressively, and headed back to his army. Remus turned and walked back to his Aurors as well, breathing a heavy sigh of relief that he would not have to duel Voldemort... yet.

"What did you say?" asked Kingsley, as Remus began to motion the lines for an attack.

Remus took a deep, nervous breath and looked Kingsley right in the eyes. "I... I just asked Voldemort to surrender," he said, laughing at the hopelessness of it all.

Kingsley laughed morbidly as well. "Well I never would have managed it. I just hope Dumbledore appears soon."

Remus nodded, and then looked back across to the Dark Lord, who had sent his Death Eaters forward, but was himself unmoving as they walked past him. "I think he's sitting this one out," Kingsley commented, as the Auror lines began to move.

"We can only hope," Remus whispered, as both sides broke out into a run, and the lights and sounds of curses cut the relative silence, as the battle recommenced on the burning grounds of Hogwarts.

It was at this time that Dumbledore and the other members of staff who had run from the castle appeared. Having been caught behind the Death Eater lines, Dumbledore had led his staff around and along the edge of the forest, using the smoke from Harry's fire as a cover most of the way, to come out behind the Aurors, who were now

advancing on the Death Eaters. No one noticed them at first though as the battle had begun, and curses that could kill were thick in the air.

Aurors clashed with Death Eaters and both sides lost many in the first few minutes of combat. Dumbledore strode around and through the Aurors, who had broken away into smaller groups to match the Death Eaters strategy, and towards Voldemort.

He disabled three Death Eaters with a wave of his wand, and moved ever towards the Dark Lord, who had spotted him in the crowd and smiled as he sensed victory over the old man.

Voldemort did not have to wait long, Dumbledore was quite proficient in dispatching the Death Eaters, and both sides were now scattered into one huge force, that had Death Eaters and Aurors battling at either end of the field, as the ground was soaked red in parts from the blood of the fallen. At least half of each force had been decimated within the first three minutes, and the fighting was intense on either side.

As he walked up to meet Voldemort, Dumbledore saw his allies out of the corners of his eyes. He watched Remus Lupin battle two Death Eaters and defeat them both, Sirius Black soon joined him and together they pushed forward with a group of Aurors behind them. He saw members of the Order, Kingsley Shacklebolt and Nymphadora Tonks battling side by side, but his main gaze was focused upon Tom Riddle, who was awaiting him just ahead.

"Hello, Tom," Dumbledore said gravely as he finally reached his goal.

"Dumbledore," nodded Voldemort, raising his wand against the headmaster. "Come to meet your end?"

"We both know why I'm here, Tom. This has to end!"

"Indeed it does," Voldemort agreed. "And it will, with your death and that of the unworthy in Salazar's school."

Dumbledore raised his own wand now, as it had previously been hanging at his side. "I will never allow you to set foot within Hogwarts castle again."

Voldemort smiled. "You, old man, will have no choice. *AVADA KEDAVRA!*"

Dumbledore remained calm, he had expected that. A flick of his wand and he transfigured a nearby boulder into a wall of rock, six feet by three, and placed it in front of him. The green light of death disintegrated against the rock, which promptly exploded into many fragments.

Voldemort didn't miss a beat though, and quickly cast a fire curse at Dumbledore, who deflected it easily, and retaliated with a disabling charm of his own. This broke upon Voldemort's shield, and he shot back a powerful blasting curse.

Dumbledore brandished his wand like a whip, and caught the blue beam of light and deflected it to his left, not really having time to keep it away from any Aurors, who had to jump to safety as the ground they stood on exploded with an awesome force. It was around this time, that Harry unleashed his forty five stunning spells in the Great Hall.

The Aurors and Death Eaters had come to something of a stalemate, as their strongest fighters duelled at the head of the field. Roughly thirty fighters remained on each force, and all of them had their wands pointed at one another, and all of them were watching the duel. Remus and Sirius stood side to side, each holding a wand on a Death Eater, who in turn held it on them.

It was the same all across the field. A Hundred or so bodies littered the ground, but those that remained now watched the duel between Voldemort and Dumbledore, the winner would take the field and the school.

Power reverberated and rang like a gong along the purple light of death from a Vestic curse Voldemort had just unleashed upon Dumbledore. Dumbledore's shield absorbed it though, and he fired another fire-binding charm upon his former pupil, who had grown incredibly powerful over the last fifty years.

"When did you walk this path, Tom?" Dumbledore asked sadly, walking towards Voldemort and transfiguring three stone guardians as he did.

Voldemort fired three destructive curses at the stone protectors surrounding Dumbledore, and reduced them all to dust. "I chose power, Dumbledore," he spat. "I chose immortality."

"Both you and I know eternal life would be a curse. You are no more immortal than I."

"LIAR!" Voldemort cried, firing another Avada Kedavra at the ancient headmaster, who, despite his best efforts, was tiring but did manage to avoid the curse. One hundred and fifty three years was not an age to be duelling Dark Lords at. "I have taken many steps down the road to immortality. You are all that stands in my way."

Dumbledore managed a tired smile. "I beg to differ," he said calmly. "I am not the only one who stands against you, Tom. Remember the prophecy?"

Voldemort's red eyes were alight with rage and he sent three quick waves of sheer power at Dumbledore, who managed to absorb one and deflect the other two, but his wand shook in his hand. "*Nexusis!*" he whispered, and long vines grew from the tip of his wand, clawing at Voldemort and binding him strongly.

Voldemort smiled and raised his wand above his head, bringing it down in a cutting motion that severed the vines, and knocked Dumbledore back. But he wasn't finished yet. He took a step forward, sent another power spell towards Dumbledore, complete with a killing curse and finally the disarming jinx.

True to his title of the strongest wizard of the age, Dumbledore managed to dodge all three spells, but he did almost lose his wand, and every wizard who beheld that duel could tell that he was losing. The Death Eaters began to cheer on their master, who had a sadistic smile on his face that showed he was enjoying this duel, while Dumbledore had a look of sheer concentration and exhaustion upon his.

"No..." breathed Remus.

Breathing heavily, Dumbledore tried one final time to best Voldemort, but it was all for naught. Finally succumbing to the frailties of age, Dumbledore was struck in the chest with a pain curse that broke his ribs, which in turn damaged his lungs and forced him to cough up some blood. He was knocked to his knees. Voldemort smiled victoriously and with a flick of his own wand, summoned Dumbledore's wand to him.

"How the times have changed, old man," hissed Voldemort, walking towards the fallen headmaster, whose beard was speckled with blood from his punctured lungs. His breath came in struggled gasps as well, as his lungs were being crushed.

All was quiet upon the grounds, and those watching up at the castle, or on the field, were completely silent as well. Fear welled up in the hearts of the Aurors and the Order then, as Voldemort pointed his wand at Dumbledore for the final time, and laughed.

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Harry shrugged and rubbed his sore shoulder. "Did not know who they were messing with," he said simply, as his mother and father looked on at him in awe, and all the sounds of battle outside ceased ominously, and the only sound heard was that of a high pitched evil laughter.

Harry's eyes hardened, and without another word he swept by his parents and made for the castle exit. "Harry... wait!" cried Lily, as James joined his son's side.

"You should go and restrain those Death Eaters in there," Harry said calmly, without turning around. "They should be out for a few hours after what hit them, but you never know."

James turned to see Lily nod slightly, wiping her eyes and running into the Great Hall. "Thank you, Harry," he then whispered.

"For what?" he asked.

"For keeping her out of what's to come."

Harry nodded ever so slightly, and then he and his father stepped out into the smoky, bitter grounds of Hogwarts. They saw the battle had come to a stop across the way, as Voldemort had beaten Dumbledore into submission. "Dear Merlin...." breathed James, his wand now shaking in his hand. "We can't lose Albus."

"You won't," Harry said, and the simple pragmatic truth in his voice made James believe him without question. He hadn't seen a real display of power from Harry yet, he had only seen him defend himself on the way back up to the castle, but he felt that he was about to throw down the gauntlet, right at Voldemort's feet.

"Stay low," Harry continued, as they set off towards Voldemort and the remaining Aurors and Death Eaters. *It must have been a quick fight, thought Harry. It has only been about forty minutes since I got everyone back to the castle.*

The smoke was again their best defence, but many saw their approach and thought nothing of it. The Aurors really didn't think anyone could help them if Dumbledore had fallen, and the Death Eaters knew their victory was sealed with the headmaster's death. The fate of the battle, and of the hope of this world, now rested with Harry.

As Harry and James approached, walking back to back through the mingled lines of Death Eaters and Aurors, both having wands raised in defence as several turned upon them. They past Remus and Sirius, who Harry gave the slightest of nods and a small smile to and continued up through the mass towards the rise where Voldemort held Dumbledore at wand point.

Voldemort had not yet seen their approach, as his mind was focused solely on killing Dumbledore. He had envisioned this moment for twenty years, but first he had some questions. "Tell me, Dumbledore," he hissed, trailing his wand along Dumbledore's bearded cheek. "Are the rumours true? Has Harry Potter returned from the dead?"

Dumbledore managed a small smile, even in his pained condition. "The prophecy... holds true," he said through painful breath.

"And where is this Potter now?" Voldemort spat. "Where is your supposed saviour?"

Dumbledore just shook his head sadly. "Death, Tom... He comes for you."

Voldemort had had enough. He had sent his inner circle to retrieve this Potter boy, they would return soon and Dumbledore would tell him no more. Keeping his wand trained on Dumbledore's throat, he addressed the crowds. "TODAY!" he began. "TODAY A NEW POWER WILL CLAIM THIS SCHOOL."

There were cheers from the Death Eaters and Harry clenched his teeth as they slowly moved towards the Dark Lord. "WATCH NOW," continued Voldemort. "AS ALBUS DUMBLEDORE, HERO OF THE LIGHT, FALLS AT MY HAND!" Voldemort then turned and spoke so only Dumbledore could hear him. "Any final words, fool..?"

Dumbledore blinked away the pain in his eyes, and looked passed Voldemort and down to all the Aurors and Death Eaters on the field before them. He sighed, but then beheld a sight that blossomed hope in his heart. It was Harry, and Dumbledore knew that all their hopes now rested on this boy's shoulders. Either Harry defeated Voldemort, or they all died that day.

"He has come, Tom," Dumbledore said, wheezing as his chest burnt from the pain. "Prove your immortality now, and defeat the prophecy!"

Voldemort's eyes narrowed and he turned to follow Dumbledore's gaze. He was momentarily surprised to see a lone figure standing only twenty feet away, wand in hand and emerald green eyes shining out from behind wire-framed glasses. *Could this be...?*

All of the Aurors, Death Eaters, and students watching from up at the castle held their breath, as they waited for someone to do anything. For a moment, Voldemort was blinded by what he knew of the prophecy, and he forgot about Dumbledore and stepped into a duelling stance to greet this stranger.

"I killed you, boy," he hissed, hoping to see this teenager cower in fear as all but Dumbledore did when they looked upon him.

Harry took a few more steps forward, wand hanging lazily by his side and approached the Dark Lord. It was then that Harry got his first real look at his enemy in this world, and he did not resemble the Voldemort he had known, not entirely anyway. If it wasn't for the red eyes, a sign that a person had been immersed in the Dark Arts for too long, then this man could have passed for a relatively pale human. His skin was almost white, but he did not resemble a snake as the other one had. He had a nose, not slits, and his skin looked more like flesh than the bone his Voldemort had.

"You killed Harry Potter," Harry said, shaking his head. "And yet here I am."

Voldemort frowned. This boy showed no fear. *Who was he? Why was he so confident?* "If you are the Potter the prophecy spoke of, then you are dead."

"Oh Tom," Harry sighed. "It would take too long to explain it all now, but have no doubt, I am Harry Potter."

Voldemort kept his wand raised, the killing curse already on the tip of his tongue. Smoke and ash flew around them from the dying fires and no sound but that of the wind reached their ears. "Well no matter," hissed the Dark Lord. "My power destroyed you once, and it will do so again."

Harry smiled incredulously. "Your power!" he cried, laughing slightly. "You killed Harry Potter when he was defenceless, a boy shopping with his parents who could not perform any magic to defend himself against your *power*. Well, in case none of your loyal morons had the courage to say it, I will. That was not power, Tom, that was cowardice."

Gasps of awe, anger, and respect rang out across the field from the assembled Aurors and Death Eaters, and James, who stood with Remus and Sirius now, could not help but smile. "What does he think he's doing?" whispered Remus. "He's done for!"



"We'll see," smiled James. "I think we're about to see a very powerful duel."

"HOW DARE YOU!" cried the Dark Lord. "I have killed men for less."

"I know," said Harry. "Much less... but that's beside the point now. You have to leave these grounds, and you're going to go quietly or I'm going to kill you."

Now Voldemort laughed. "Kill me, boy?" he spat. "You are not worthy enough to duel me. My inner circle shall dispatch you."

Running a hand through his hair, Harry shrugged nonchalantly. "They won't be joining us," he said.

"And why is that?" raged Voldemort, increasingly infuriated at the lack of fear this boy was showing.

Harry smiled slyly. "Because they got in my way..."

Voldemort swallowed but was more than confident in his own abilities. He stepped forward, closer to Harry, and swung his wand down in a sweeping motion. Great torrents of blue flame shot through the space in between Harry and Voldemort, and at the last possible moment Harry flicked his own wand, and the flames exploded against his shield, falling in familiar blue sparks.

*And it was then that the two strongest wizards in that world duelled.*

Taking a deep breath, Harry could scarcely believe he was about to do this again. Duel the Dark Lord, in another world, and restore the hope of a people that had long since despaired of it. He still marvelled at the fact sometimes, that it was he who had to take on this burden. Little Harry Potter who had lived under the stairs for ten years, had grown to survive death and destruction countless times and even break through the boundaries that separated universes, all to bring him to this point.

"AVADA KEDAVRA!" cried Voldemort.

Harry knew he would not survive that curse again, not under these circumstances anyway and he swore under his breath, wishing there was a shield that could deflect the Killing curse. Harry purposely tripped over his own feet and fell onto his back, the green light rocketing over him and coming within an inch of his cheek.

"*CUSINDEO!*" he shouted from the floor, and stood quickly as his bone breaking hex dissipated upon Voldemort's strong shield.

"Very good, boy," hissed the Dark Lord. "You know of the Dark Arts."

"I have to know my enemy," Harry replied, walking left as Voldemort walked right.

"Indeed," nodded Voldemort. "*AVADA KEDAVRA!*"

Harry was far enough away to side step this one, although it did come at him incredibly fast and almost hit the side of his billowing robes as the wind blew them around. Again he felt the cold bite of death, but retaliated quickly.

"*AROS CRI!*" he shouted, and was encouraged to see six metallic arrows, hard as silver, fly out of the end of his wand and shoot towards Voldemort. He had never tried that curse before, but was pleased with its success.

Voldemort moved his wand around in small circles and muttered heating charms. The air in front of him became as hot as a furnace, and the arrows melted away to liquid metal as they flew through the scorching air. Keeping his wand spinning, Voldemort melded and fused the falling liquid metal into dozens of tiny sharp pieces of shrapnel, each one jagged and deformed.

Harry realised a moment before it happened what Voldemort was doing, and prepared himself as a hundred pieces of jagged metal screamed back through the air towards him. He smiled to unnerve Voldemort and as the wall of metal approached, Harry sent out magic from his thoughts, and began to stop them in mid-air.

It only took a few moments, and his wand had hung uselessly at his side the whole time, but the air was now spotted with little pieces of

suspended shrapnel. With another thought, Harry let them all fall to the ground, as he knew they would melt if he sent them at Voldemort. He could feel the heat of the air from where he stood.

"What did you do, boy?" Voldemort asked, confusion in his eyes.

Harry smiled. "I asked you to leave, and now you're going to pay. *VESTIC!*"

Voldemort's eyes widened in surprise but the vestic death curse was shattered against his shield. It was more of a surprise that anyone would have the courage to fire a curse designed to kill at him. He realised then and there, that this was no childish duel.

*"IMPERIO!"* he bellowed, and Harry received this one in the chest, as Voldemort smiled. He now had the boy under his control.

Harry felt the familiar light headed feeling of the imperious curse, but his pure magic and will broke out of it a moment later, and he sent a wave of power at the Dark Lord.

Voldemort's eyes widened in disbelief as Harry broke free of his Imperius curse, and he was knocked back as a wave of pure power hit him.

"You'll have to do better than that," Harry growled. He had realised now that this Voldemort was not as strong as the Voldemort in his world. He had not had the bond to strengthen them, nor had he received Harry's blood. This would be interesting.

Voldemort no longer spoke, he raised his wand again. *"AVADA KEDAVRA!"* he cried.

Harry jumped to his left and fell into a roll, coming up a few feet from his previous position, just as Voldemort fired another Killing curse. Thinking fast, Harry turned on his side and took a few steps back. Both Killing curse now flew past him, one quicker than the other. But he stood in between both equal jets of green light, and the second past within millimetres of the bridge of his nose.

As soon as they had gone by, Harry breathed a sigh of relief and turned to see Voldemort, but swore as he saw, in the small moments between seconds in which the mind worked, silver arrows hurtling through the air to meet him. "Damn it," he whispered. He should have anticipated this move. Working fast, Harry managed to deflect five of the seven of the arrows.

The final two shot through the air at an incredible speed, one whistled over his head, just missing him, but the other struck his right arm, just below the elbow. It was travelling at such a velocity that it pierced Harry right through the bone and came out the other side, the shaft of the metal arrow embedded right in the elbow joint.

Harry cried out in pain and lost all use in his already damaged right arm. His wand fell from his fingers and blood flowed freely down his arm. He began to breathe heavily, and only just managed to get out of the way of a second barrage of arrows fired from Voldemort, before he began to master the pain. *Come on* he thought. *This is nothing.*

His wand had rolled a few feet away, but Harry didn't want to waste any time retrieving it, so he pooled some raw magic into the palm of his left hand, keeping it hidden from Voldemort.

"You are defeated, boy," hissed Voldemort triumphantly. "An admirable effort, but sadly one that will not be remembered."

Harry glared with nothing but absolute hatred at Voldemort. "You always make the mistake of underestimating me," he said quietly, and then in the blink of an eye, threw the raw magic in his palm at Voldemort. It swirled through the air between the two duellists faster than any curse that had gone before it. A spinning, spiralling disc of white light that shattered Voldemort's defences and hit the Dark Lord in his stomach, burning through the robes and knocking him to the ground.

Voldemort screamed in untold pain.

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"Bugger me..." breathed Ron, holding a pair of omnioculars to his eyes that he had run back to his dormitory to retrieve. "I think Harry just... won."

Hermione bit her bottom lip. From where she stood she could see two figures had been duelling while they all watched, both from the castle and the grounds. She had seen some awesome spellwork being cast between the two duellists, but she didn't know who was winning.

Ron passed her the omnioculars and she focused on the fight, on Harry. She winced as she saw the long silver arrow that was stuck through his right arm, but she couldn't help but smile. He was standing, while the Dark Lord had fallen. Her hope lessened though, as You-Know-Who rose to his feet, and began to conjure a thick black string, that at first looked like cloud, but was in fact dark magic.

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Harry didn't move as Voldemort rose unsteadily to his feet, clutching his wounded stomach with one hand, whilst muttering small incantations with the other. A thick black stream began to flow from the end of his wand, and swirl slowly around Voldemort, rising up above his head.

Breathing heavily from exhaustion, Harry held his wounded arm close to his side and wiped the sweat off his forehead with the other. *What is he doing?* Harry wondered, but then recalled a passage he had read in one of the Dark Arts text he had studied over the years.

*Resembling a black cloud, the Grínoú, is a physical manifestation of the evil and dark power within the caster. Designed to kill its intended victim, the only defence against such a spell, which has not been used in centuries, is an equal Grínoú of pure light magic. For the purpose of defence, the incantation is, 'Fors grin axá' Warning: requires large amount of power to use. Not recommended.*

Harry sighed and wiped his bloodied hands on his robes. His right arm was slick with blood, but the knuckles on his left hand had split open at some point, and were now dirty and sore. He watched as Voldemort completed his 'cloud' of dark magic and then with a

sadistic smile, raised his wand, and brought it swinging down in a long sweeping motion.

Harry didn't move as the line of thick, black dark magic swept across the space in between him and Voldemort. He took a step back to tighten his position though, and then summoning some pure power, formed his own Grínoú. Now he was using wandless magic, so he didn't know if it would work the same way, but he wasn't disappointed.

"*Fors grin axá!*" he called, and his entire hand was instantly encased in a thick, white light that felt like a second skin. It doubled in size a brief second later and then Harry knew what he had to do. As Voldemort's stream closed in on him, Harry balled his unseen hand into a fist, and then thrust it forward into the air in front of him.

A white line of this light erupted from the ball on the end of his hand, and rushed to meet the approaching spike of Voldemort's dark cloud. Harry braced himself, as did Voldemort who could not believe that this boy had managed to counter one of his darkest spells. The two Grínoú, both light and dark, met just in front of Harry. When they touched a deafening explosion sounded and a wave of grey energy pulsed from the core of the impact, pushing both Voldemort and Harry back a few paces, more so for Harry because he stood closer.

Harry's good arm shook with the force of the two meeting energies, and he fell to one knee to garner the strength to keep his arm raised, and his magic strong. Voldemort's wand also shook in his hand, and he pushed all his magical strength into destroying this boy and his protection, but found an unbelievable wall of resistance before the boy. It seemed impenetrable.

Rocks, debris, and the hundreds of little metal pieces of shrapnel that littered their duelling area were blown away as the power from the two beams of magic fought for supremacy. A couple hit Harry in the chest and legs, and one on his cheek. He did not feel the burning wounds they caused though, as he had grown accustomed to smaller injuries and his mind was fully focused on defeating Voldemort.

Voldemort was also hit by a few pieces of shrapnel, but like Harry he ignored it. Superficial injuries that could be healed instantly later. Right now he had to focus.

The magic being thrown into the two Grínoú though, was now reaching a climax. Screams of power echoed along the vast expanse of the grounds as Aurors and Death Eaters alike were being pushed back by the pulsating rings of energy that flew off of the magic, but many now had hope that this boy, whoever he was, may just win this fight.

Harry closed his eyes but kept his arm raised. He calmed himself and reached deep inside for that extra well of magic he knew to be there. He had felt it in his last battle with Voldemort. It was what had saved him from the Avada Kedavra the second time. *The power the Dark Lord knows not...* He could feel it deep inside of him, but it was just out of reach. He wasn't ready to have control of it yet.

Shaking his head and frowning, Harry moved away from that power and headed for his ample supply of pure magic, forced into him through circumstance. He felt the piece that was missing, that the other Voldemort now had, but moved on from there and tapped into his remaining power.

Harry opened his eyes and any who looked into them at that moment would have seen silver sparkles amongst the emerald green. With a monumental effort, Harry rose to his feet and pushed a final burst of power into his Grínoú. It reverberated like a gong and shook the earth as it touched Voldemort's black power.

Instantly it overcame the Dark Lord's magic, and clipped Voldemort on the shoulder as a dozen waves of equal power exploded from the broken connection, destroying large patches of the nearby grass and throwing dirt and debris high into the air. Harry fell back to his knees with nausea from the power he had exuded, but bit his lip and struggled to rise again as Voldemort was driven into the ground by the pure magic.

Harry blinked and shook his head to clear his mind, holding his pierced arm close to his body as he did. Smoke and ash hid the form of Voldemort but it was slowly clearing and the entire school population and the Aurors and Death Eaters held their breath.

But the hope filled eyes of hundreds were now upon Harry. Inexplicably drawn to this strange, quiet boy who alone in this world of terror and dark confusion seemed to know what he was doing.

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"Did you see that!" cried Ron, once again passing on his omnioculars to Hermione and then Ginny. "He just... he just... he just..."

"Duelled You-Know-Who and won," a voice to Ron's left said. He wasn't sure who it was, and he didn't turn to look, but they were right.

"His power is amazing," Ginny whispered, staring at the kneeling form of Harry through the omnioculars, which had been recording the entire duel. "And he's only sixteen!"

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The smoke cleared slowly and Harry saw a form develop in a deep crater the explosion of magic had caused. He slowly stepped over to it, dodging the small holes and fires that littered the ground.

Sure enough, Voldemort lay in the crater, breathing heavily and slowly. The magical battle had not killed him, but Harry hadn't thought for a moment that it would. He waved his hand behind him and caught his wand deftly in his left hand, and made to levitate Voldemort out of the hole so that he was visible to all.

Harry threw him roughly to the ground and looked out upon the sea of faces before him. "YOU SEE!" he cried. "HE IS NOT AS IMMORTAL AS HE'D HAVE YOU BELIEVE!"

Voldemort coughed and rose aching to his knees, and glared defiantly up at Harry, who had his wand trained upon him.

"If only it was this easy in my world," Harry whispered regretfully, and Voldemort's eyes widened as he realised where this boy had come from.

Not wasting another second, Voldemort delved deeply into his robes pocket and pulled out a small metallic object, bringing his wand



around to tap it as he did. Harry swore and instantly fired a Vestic curse at the Dark Lord. But it was too late, the Portkey was activated and Voldemort shimmered away to nothing, leaving a very enraged Harry behind.

"DAMN IT!" he cried, kicking the ground where Voldemort had knelt only a few moments ago. *Why is it always a Portkey!* his mind screamed at him.

The Aurors and Death Eaters were momentarily shocked at the disappearance of Voldemort, but soon everything fell into place and the Death Eaters made a break for it. Voldemort had fled, they had lost, and the thirty or so that were able to move, tried to escape.

The Aurors realised this of course, and began to stun and disable the retreating Death Eaters, who were running for the forest or the castle gates, anywhere to escape the anti-Apparation wards the castle had. A few had portkeys themselves and they managed to escape. One or two did make it into the forest but the remaining Aurors and Hogwarts staff did stop the majority of them.

The battle was over, and Harry had won a much needed victory for the light, but it hadn't come without its cost.

As the Death Eaters began to escape, Harry collapsed on to the destroyed ground that had taken the brunt of their duel. His arm hurt him terribly, the long silver arrow still pierced through it. His legs were also a bloody mess, from all the flying metal shards that had hit him a moment ago. Several other shards were embedded in him elsewhere as well but Harry blocked out the pain.

It hurt to breathe and Harry realised he must have cracked a rib or two at one point; he hadn't really felt it happen. He frowned as he watched the Aurors chase down the Death Eaters, leaving him relatively alone at the head of a field of bodies, both light and dark alike.

Looking down to the arrow in his arm, Harry waved his hand on the end of it that was nearest to his flesh, melting it into a straight point that could be easily extracted. His right arm was useless as the point of the arrow had shattered his bone, so when Harry grasped the

arrow from the other side, he closed his eyes and bit his lip. He knew this would hurt.

Taking a deep breath and then counting to three, Harry yanked the arrow hard and cried out in bitter pain as it was pulled through bone and cartilage, setting his nerves on fire. Blood flowed fresh and anew in a stream that Harry did his best to clot, but his healing skills were rudimentary at best. He managed to stop the blood flow, but a professional would need to heal it properly.

Over the grounds, Harry saw the Aurors begin to bind the Death Eaters together, awaiting reinforcements from the Ministry to take them away. He saw his father, Sirius, and Remus running back over towards him, and as he waited he cleaned his glasses of the grime they had accumulated over the past few hours. It was then that he heard it.

"Harry..." whispered a croaky, and almost unheard voice.

Harry turned his head around from where he sat on the grounds, and beheld the broken form of Albus Dumbledore, a hand on his chest and tears in his eyes. Forgetting his own pain in an instant, Harry leapt to his feet and sprinted over to the fallen headmaster, coming to a stop and falling to his knees as he reached him.

"Professor..." he whispered, seeing the blood on Dumbledore's face. "What..."

"Impressive, Harry," Dumbledore managed, smiling ever so slightly, his half moon spectacles lying shattered at his side. "I should never have doubted you."

Harry smiled slightly himself. "We need to get you to the Hospital Wing," he said.

Dumbledore coughed, and in so doing brought up some more blood. "I believe you are correct."

Harry nodded and stood up quickly, pointing his useable left hand at the broken form of Dumbledore. "*Mobilicorpus!*"

Feeling the connection between his hand and Dumbledore's body, Harry levitated him a few feet above the ground, and then, ignoring the pain in his legs, ran for the castle. His father, Sirius, and Remus watched him go, and changed their direction to follow him, back into the castle.

Coughing slightly as the dying smoke in the air burnt his lungs, Harry made for the castle. It took three minutes and he did not stop, even though his ribs hurt, as did his legs, and the exhaustion was almost overwhelming.

The shattered and splintered doors that lay in pieces on either side of the castle entrance greeted Harry as he levitated Dumbledore up the steps and through the broken entrance. He sighed with relief when he saw Madam Pomfrey, and his mother Lily rushing down the Entrance Hall stairs, wands in hand and looks of determination upon their faces.

They spotted Harry instantly and gasped as they beheld Dumbledore, floating in front of him. Albus Dumbledore didn't move as Harry lowered him to the floor, and he had lost consciousness on the run up to the castle, but Madam Pomfrey set immediately to work, as Harry stepped back to catch his breath.

"He's alive," Lily said happily, helping Madam Pomfrey as assistant matron.

"Only just," Madam Pomfrey said seriously, and waved her wand over his body, a light green light encasing him for a moment. "That will keep him in this state until I can get him to the infirmary. Come along, Lily," she said, and then performed the mobilicorpus spell.

Lily gave Harry a brief look of awe and thanks as they disappeared up the stairs again, and Harry finally succumbed to the exhaustion in his limbs, and collapsed against the wall next to the door, near the house point hourglasses.

His head swam with memories of both worlds and Harry mostly thought of Ginny. He had left her in a world that was home to a Voldemort of untold power, and he could not get back to that world yet. It made him angry, and once again his magic responded to that anger, cracking all over his skin electrifyingly.

Thankfully, it was then that James, Sirius, and Remus ran into the castle, straight past Harry as none of them saw him against the inside wall. "Do you think he went on to the hospital wing?" James asked the others, panting heavily.

"Probably," breathed Sirius, hands on his knees. "You two go on ahead. I'll catch you up."

James and Remus nodded as Sirius caught his breath in the middle of the hall. None of them had seen Harry, and Harry made no move to get their attention, and he watched as James and Remus disappeared up the stairs and around the corner.

That just left Harry and Sirius alone in the Entrance Hall. Harry was quiet and Sirius was breathing heavily, muttering under his breath. "Bloody unbelievable. Not even Dumbledore could have..."

"Hello," Harry said calmly, pushing himself up off the wall and limping over to Sirius.

Sirius jumped in shock and surprise and turned quickly, wand at the ready. His eyes widened in awe and respect as he saw Harry, but he soon became concerned.

"You... look like you need to get to the hospital wing," he said calmly, walking over to meet Harry and placing a hand on his good shoulder.

Harry stared remorsefully into his godfather's eyes. They weren't haunted or hollow like the Sirius' he had known, but full of life and, at the moment, concern. "You're probably right," Harry said sadly, looking at the floor.

Sirius swallowed and began to lead Harry up the stairs slowly, a guiding hand still on his shoulder. For all his power Harry was still a boy, and Sirius could sense that he was battling some inner demons.

"You put up one hell of a fight out there today," he said encouragingly. "Saved us all."

Harry laughed quietly. "You should see me when I'm on top form," he replied, coughing and wincing in pain.

Sirius smiled as the two of them made their slow way up through the castle. At a few points Harry wavered and almost fell, but Sirius caught him each time and Harry muttered his thanks.

Soon the doors to the infirmary appeared up ahead, and just as Sirius and Harry approached them, James and Remus came barging out again.

"HARRY!" cried James, upon seeing his eldest child. "What are you-"

"Prongs," Sirius whispered urgently. "He needs to see Pomfrey now."

James took another look at Harry and then nodded, moving himself and Remus out of the way of the doors, so Sirius could lead him in.

"I'm all right," Harry said softly, as he sat down on the nearest bed. "I just need a drink."

Remus conjured a goblet of water and passed it to James, who in turn gave it to Harry. Harry drank deeply and drained the goblet, sighing with relief as his parched throat ceased stinging.

"So I guess we won then..." Harry said smiling, looking down the length of the infirmary to see Madam Pomfrey and his mother performing complex spells over an unconscious Dumbledore.

"I'd say so," James smiled nervously. "Harry, where did you learn all that?"

Harry shrugged and pulled his legs up and around onto the bed, resting his back against the soft frame. "Books for the most part, and a few trainers that I worked with earlier this year."

It was Remus that spoke next. "You really are from another world..." he whispered, having had Sirius explain Harry's arrival a few days ago. He hadn't truly believed half of what he'd heard, but now it was undoubtable.

"Hello, Professor," Harry said quietly, looking at Lupin, who frowned.

"I was never a professor, Harry," Remus replied.

Harry shook his head. "No... Oh! There are some Death Eaters in the Great Hall, by the way. The inner circle. You might want to go check on them."

Remus looked at James and Sirius, and then nodded. He had to oversee the prisoner transfers anyway. "I'll see you all later," he said, and then exited the infirmary.

The sheets beneath Harry's legs had been smeared with the blood of all his wounds, and Sirius noticed this. "I'll go see if Lily can be spared," he said, leaving James and Harry alone.

"I'm sorry," Harry whispered, as his father sat down on the bed next to him.

"For what?" James asked, smiling bemusedly.

"I let him get away," he replied, his left hand instinctively balling into a fist.

James frowned. *That wasn't right.* "You have done more today for our cause, than anyone has managed in the past two decades, Harry. You don't have to be sorry."

Harry shook his head in regret. "Yeah..." he whispered. "Sure."

James continued. "Do you know what this is going to bring to our world, Harry?" he asked and Harry shrugged. "Hope," James said. "You did a great thing today, Harry, and hundreds witnessed it."

Harry nodded slowly and then sighed. He removed his glasses and placed them on the table next to his bed, before leaning back and resting his eyes. The magical and physical exhaustion finally overran him though, and he did not remember falling asleep.

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## Chapter 7 - Hero or Villain?

*I have not yet begun to fight (as his ship was sinking, 23 September 1779)*

~~John Paul Jones

Harry did not sleep for very long. Roughly four hours after sleep had taken him he opened his sore green eyes to see an equal emerald pair shining down upon him.

"Hello..." whispered Lily warmly, brushing some hair out of his face kindly.

Coughing, Harry pulled himself up against the frame of the bed and winced as his shoulder pained him and protested against the movement. It took him a minute to get his bearings as memories of that morning came flooding back to him. *Death Eaters... Voldemort... Grínoú... Dumbledore!*

"How's Dumbledore?" he managed, placing a hand on his forehead.

Lily took a deep breath. "He'll live," she said. "It'll take a few days for him to heal though."

Harry nodded. "How many Death Eaters did we get?"

Lily had been setting a bandage around his pierced and shattered arm when he had awoken, and she continued with that now. "Forty three," she replied. "Twenty escaped and many were killed."

"He only attacked with a fraction of his force though, didn't he?"

Lily sighed and nodded resolutely. "Voldemort... still has about four hundred servants." She then looked into his eyes, having finished setting his arm. "Although I doubt he'll be eager to attack you again."

Harry laughed but it turned into a cough. He could feel the bandages and salve on his chest, healing his cracked and bruised ribs. "Let's

not talk about him anymore..." he managed, as Lily replaced his glasses.

"It's all everyone is talking about," she whispered. "Everyone is still in utter disbelief, Harry. You duelled Voldemort and won! There have been people from the Ministry trying to get in here to see you, thank you. Many of the Aurors also want to meet you."

"How'd you keep the Ministry out?" he asked.

A small smile played at the corners of his mother's mouth. "Well... it was James and Sirius really," she began. "Sirius was the -er- *guard* dog for the infirmary and James kept sending them off to different places around the castle."

Smiling slightly, Harry nodded and then had a good look around the hospital wing. There were a few Aurors in about half of the beds and it looked as if several of the healers from St. Mungo's had been called in. Lily noticed what he was looking at.

"The other injured Aurors are at St. Mungo's. This was all we could handle," she said sadly, motioning to the full beds.

Harry coughed again, and then swung his legs over the side of the bed. He shook his head of dizziness and stood up slowly. Lily reached out to steady him, and Harry thanked her.

"I healed all of the wounds on your legs," she said. "You should be right now, but you might want to rest awhile longer."

"No... I'll be fine. Thanks," he replied. "I just need to go have a shower."

Lily bit her bottom lip. "You're going to have to go to Gryffindor tower then. The healers are in and out of the bathrooms in here."

Harry nodded. "I'll see you all later then," he said, flexing his sore right arm.



"Be careful, Harry," Lily said, her eyes glistening. "There are many suspect people from the Ministry here. Some of them could be Death Eaters."

Harry heeded her warning and then headed over to the infirmary doors. As soon as he walked outside it took everyone in the corridor a few moments to take in his face and match it with the description, and the few photographs they had seen of the awesome duel that morning, to recognise Harry.

A dozen flashes exploded in Harry's face and he stepped back from the sea of approaching reporters and Ministry personnel. To his left, Sirius barked loudly as Padfoot and bared his teeth but that didn't seem to deter them for long.

"MR. POTTER!" one shouted, his camera flashing incessantly.

"HAR-"

"MR. POT-"

"YOU!"

"HARRY!"

They were drowning one another out as Harry sighed and took a few steps back, but he knew it would probably be best if he answered a few questions. He knew that it would help restore the fight in a people that had long since tired of the war, but even though they were all here to talk to him, he could not get a word in edgewise.

Harry removed his wand from within the pocket of his ruined and bloody robes and muttered a silencing charm, "*Silencio!*" he said, casting it in a big net over the entire group surging upon him.

It was quite amusing to watch them mouth a few words, before realisation sunk in. None of them could mutter the counter charm though, as they were all silenced and many of their looks of excitement turned to disgruntled ones. The flashes of the cameras weren't silenced though, and Harry saw little white spots before his eyes. He ignored that.

"Good evening," he said to the silenced crowd. "Sorry about the silencing charm, but I couldn't understand any of you."

The crowd stopped approaching him and looked at themselves in silence. Harry saw that the first two rows had to be reporters and their cameraman, whilst the rest were either Ministry personnel or Aurors.

"Now," continued Harry. "I know you probably have many questions, and I will allow you to ask them in a moment, but first there are a few... guidelines I would like you to follow." Harry stared at the group, and watched as many of them nodded eagerly. All the while the cameras flashed.

"One," said Harry. "When I remove the silencing charm, I want you to ask questions from right to left. That is, we start with you and work our way across," he pointed to a young reporter who smiled unbelievably at the fact that she was going to get to ask the first question. "Two," Harry continued. "Can we stop all these flashes," he said, raising a hand against the cameras. They stopped instantly and then the group waited expectantly for Harry to remove the charm.

Nodding to the first reporter, Harry waved his hand and the silencing charm was taken off the entire group. True to their word, the lot of them remained silent. "And you are?" asked Harry.

"Felice Garnet, Daily Prophet," the small blonde witch smiled ecstatically at him.

Harry smiled back as Padfoot came to rest at his side. Harry reached down and scratched behind his ears, inwardly smiling. "You have a question?" he asked.

"Mr. Potter," she said and every reporter there had a Quick-Quotes quill poised and ready to receive his response. "Who are you?" she asked bemusedly.

Harry shrugged. "I'm Harry Potter," he replied.

"Yes," continued Felice, "but Harry Potter was reported dead six years ago, after an attack by You-Know-Who on Diagon Alley, there

were many witnesses. If you are he, can you please tell us what happened there?"

Padfoot growled next to him but Harry patted him reassuringly. "Well if Harry Potter was killed six years ago, then I guess I shouldn't be here now."

There were many smiles from the crowd at this but Harry could tell they were not satisfied on that issue. "Anything else?" he asked Felice.

"Indeed," she replied. "How did it feel to duel You-Know-Who?"

"It hurt," Harry shrugged, brandishing his broken arm for them all to see. "And call him Voldemort," he added and then frowned at all the gasps of fear this elicited from the crowd. Some of the more theatrical ones grasped their chests in fear.

"But where did you learn all of that magic?" Felice continued. "Why are you so powerful?"

Harry laughed sadly. "I wish I knew," he replied. "The magic I've been studying for the past six years, preparing for war. The power... well I guess someone had to have it."

Flashes erupted again as Harry smiled and the Quick-Quotes quills were doing a mile a minute along the long rolls of parchment in the reporter's hands.

"Is it true you disabled You-Know-Who's inner circle on your own?" Felice continued.

Harry coughed. "Where did you hear that?" he asked.

She smiled brilliantly at him. "That is only one of the many rumours surrounding you, Mr. Potter."

"Really," Harry said. "Well I suppose that one is true. They were a bunch of morons anyway."

All of them looked on at Harry in disbelief and some in awe, but beside that they all looked at him with some measure of respect. "Why did you choose to fight, Mr. Potter?" Felice then asked. "What possessed you to stand against You Know Who?"

Harry blinked. "Because no one else would," he said quietly. "If it wasn't for Dumbledore you people would have lost this war a long time ago. I felt it was time you won it."

"What about the reports stating that you used dark magic in the fight this morning?" interrupted a voice that Harry had come to despise over the years. He turned to face it. "Rita Skeeter," the voice said. "Daily Prophet."

"I know," Harry replied tiredly. "I believe Miss. Garnet was speaking," he said and turned back to Felice.

"The public have the right to know about this, Mr. Potter," Rita continued, smiling infuriatingly. "Please answer the question."

Harry took a deep breath and counted backwards from five before turning to face Rita again. "I used what magic was necessary," he answered her, his face set in a stony glare that they all took a step back from. "I never used the Unforgivable curses, even though they were fired at me countless times, and I don't see why this has any relevance..."

"Well," began Rita. "You have an impressive power within you, Mr. Potter," she said, and Harry fell into a mock bow. "And the Wizarding world has been at war for twenty years against a Dark Lord with impressive power."

"What are you saying?" Harry asked, although he had begun to guess.

"We have a right to know that even if you do defeat You-Know-Who, Mr. Potter, are you just simply going to replace him?"

Everyone in the corridor was completely silent, even as Harry broke out into a deep laughter. "You really are scraping the bottom of the

barrel now, aren't you, Rita?" he replied. "Thank you everyone," he continued. "No more questions."

Harry turned and began to walk away as the flashes from the cameras erupted again and the entire procession spoke at once. Harry waved his hand and produced a magical barrier, covering the height and width of the hall in between himself and the reporters.

They could not pass through this blue barrier and Harry smiled a final time, waved and then walked around the corner with Padfoot in tow. He heard several dispelling charms being fired pointlessly by the reporters and then their growls of frustration as they began to argue amongst themselves about how best to bring down the barrier.

In the blink of an eye, Padfoot the dog transformed into Sirius the man, and began laughing heartily. "Never seen anyone deal with Skeeter like that, Harry," he said smiling. "I can't wait to see what she writes about you in the *Prophet* tomorrow."

Harry shrugged and took a deep breath, wincing as his cracked ribs protested the expansion of his lungs. "Probably nothing I haven't heard before, but I think she just said what a majority of them were thinking."

Sirius frowned. "What? That you'll kill Voldemort only to take his place?"

Harry nodded. "I'm not even going to be here come the equinox. Shouldn't they just be happy someone is finally standing up to Riddle?"

Sirius sighed and he and Harry came to a stop at the moving staircases on the fourth floor. "They don't understand you, Harry. You're different, and people are always afraid of what's different."

Harry stared despondently up towards the bright sky visible through the windows several floors up in the roof of the staircase tower. "Thanks, Sirius," he said. "I'll see you later."

Sirius said his goodbyes and headed down the stairs, as Harry took the next one up. It didn't take him long to negotiate the familiar, but

deserted, corridors and come in time to Gryffindor tower. The Fat Lady in her portrait opened graciously as Harry spoke the password. Steeling himself, Harry entered the Gryffindor common room and prepared himself for whatever was coming.

He could hear discussion and laughter from within, and he found it hard to believe that they could laugh when Voldemort and his army had been on their doorstep only a few short hours ago. There was a group of third years leaning against the wall in the small corridor between the portrait hole and the actual common room and they paled in absolute confusion as Harry past them.

As soon as he entered the common room, it was as if he emitted a wave of silence, or another silencing charm, as at that very moment a pin could have been heard dropping a mile away. The large grandfather clock chimed six times as the hour fell, but that was all that broke the silence.

Harry stood there for only a few moments before casting his glance towards the stairs, shaking his arm slightly because it had begun to feel numb. It ached slightly as any broken and shattered arm should, but Harry shrugged it away. Pain he could handle, idleness he couldn't. Already, as he walked up the stairs towards the showers and the whispers broke out in the common room, he was planning his next move.

Voldemort was beaten back. Harry knew he was more than a capable adversary for the Voldemort of this world. He was stronger, faster, and had a tonne of luck and magic up his sleeve. So he was holding all the cards in this world bar one. The Dark Lord still commanded an awesome force, although his inner circle was gone... for now.

Harry undressed slowly, pulling down a golden and red towel from the rack as he went. He was careful as he removed his robes and then his shirt, revealing his bandaged ribs. Looking at himself in the mirror, he shook his head sadly at the growing number of scars he had been collecting since he was a year old.

*"You've been through the wars, son,"* said the mirror loudly.

"Don't I know it," sighed Harry, turning and walking over to the shower cubicles.

The hot spray washed away all of the day's sweat and pain. Harry felt reenergised just after spending a few minutes under the warm flow of water. His bandages were soaked but he could dry them magically later.

*What now?* thought Harry, leaning against the cubicle wall, the water spraying him lazily. *Where do I go from here?* He knew the reporters and everyone else wouldn't leave him alone, could he turn that to his advantage...? There were also other problems he didn't know the answers to. How many Aurors did the Ministry have, could any be spared from other international Ministries?

*But that led to yet more problems.*

Back in his world, after Dumbledore had petitioned the International Confederation for aid and Aurors from around the world, those countries that did offer resources and Aurors, had also given Voldemort more supporters. The Dark Wizards in several of the magical communities around the world had flocked to their Dark Lord as their countries became involved.

Shaking his head and resolving to think about it later, Harry turned off the spray and stepped out of the shower, grabbing a towel and drying himself. A few minutes later he wrapped the towel around his waist and waved his fully functional left arm over the wet bandages, which dried instantly.

He then looked at his bloodied, tattered and torn clothes, which lay in a heap near the mirror. A few cleaning spells and a transfiguration charm later, Harry pulled a clean t-shirt over his head, buttoning up his repaired pair of jeans as well.

He cleaned his glasses and repaired a hairline crack in the lens, before running a hand through his towel dry hair. His arm was still aching from the healing potions and salves that were working their magic, but he at least now felt refreshed.

The common room was almost empty as Harry entered it again. Only a few stragglers and those who weren't hungry had not gone down to dinner in the Great Hall. Harry himself was hungry, and he set off towards the portrait hole.

"HARRY!" shouted a familiar voice from near the fireplace.

Harry turned and saw his younger brother, Michael, sitting with a group of second years in the armchairs. Smiling and nodding in acknowledgement, Harry turned around again but walked straight into...

"Ginny!" he managed, catching her before she fell. Harry lifted her back to her feet and saw the confusion and awe within her eyes.

"How- How did you know my name?" she asked.

Harry just stared at her for a moment, familiar feelings from his own world surfacing. "I -er- your... brother, Ron... he told me," he managed finally.

Ginny nodded, but Harry could see the confusion and intelligence still in her eyes. She was curious. "Are you going down to the Great Hall?" she then asked warmly, smiling encouragingly.

"I am," nodded Harry, and fell into step next to Ginny as they exited the common room.

"You were unbelievable today... Harry," she said quietly, as they strolled down the corridor.

Harry shrugged. "You saw me?"

Ginny nodded and then smiled shyly. "Ron recorded your duel with You-Know-Who on his omnioculars. It's all anyone is talking about."

"I'll bet," said Harry as they reached the moving staircases.

Ginny and Harry fell into silence as they descended the stairs. It lasted until they reached the ground floor. "Where did you get all that



power?" she asked seriously, her fiery red eyes piercing his emerald green ones.

"Not entirely sure," Harry answered, again with a shrug. "I heard once that strength and courage increase by every experience in which a person faces their fears. Well I've done a lot of that, but I always thought there was something more. I have a different type of magic than most."

Ginny nodded. "What are you going to do now?" she asked. "Now that you fought You Know Who and won!?"

Harry smile sadly as they reached the Great Hall, and twirled his wand between his fingers absent mindedly. "I haven't even begun to fight," he whispered, entering the Hall.

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## **OUR SAVIOUR IS BORN**

*Felice Garnet*

*Throughout most of our lives a dark threat has been ever growing, following our footsteps, destroying any chance our children had of growing up in a world of peace, and prosperity. The Dark War that has robbed us of our youth, slain us of all innocence, and threatened to destroy our way of life, was deemed hopeless and unending.*

*Yet and amazing thing happened yesterday.*

*After breaking the wards and attacking Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry early yesterday morning, He Who Must Not Be Named proceeded to engage his Death Eaters against a handful of Ministry Aurors, whilst Albus Dumbledore duelled the Dark Lord himself. Whether it has been the weight of the past twenty years or the frailties of old age, Albus Dumbledore lost this duel, and all hope seemed to die like a flame in the wind.*

*A spark of that flame refused to die though, refused to accept*

*the path fate had lain out for our world that day. Harry Potter, long believed dead, challenged He Who Must Not Be Named to a duel that tore the earth from the ground, and created waves of power so strong that it knocked Aurors and Death Eaters alike off of their feet.*

*Albus Dumbledore was spared by this boy's courage, but the fight had only just begun. Harry Potter, a boy of only sixteen years, managed to hold his own against the most powerful and terrible wizard of our age. An epic duel that saw many old magic's, long thought impossible, spring to life in the battle for the fate of our world.*

*Not everything is known about what happened between You Know Who and Potter, but rumours are abound about this enigmatic young wizard, who managed to best He Who Must Not Be Named through sheer power, causing him to flee.*

*Potter did not escape without injury though, and spent the afternoon recuperating in the Hogwart's Hospital wing. He was seen briefly though, and this reporter did manage to ask him a few important questions pertaining to his miraculous victory over the Dark. When questioned on his decision to fight, Mr. Potter responded simply; "Because no one else would."*

*Not much is known about Harry Potter, other than that he has risen undoubtedly to the prime position on You Know Who's dreaded list, replacing Albus Dumbledore and his father, James Potter. Whoever he is, the world today owes its thanks to a small boy who saved us all yesterday.*

*It may be safe to say that we are entering the final years of this war, maybe even months. And the torch of the light has been passed from Albus Dumbledore to Harry Potter. No one can be certain of what the following days are going to hold, but for once we can say that they may hold hope.*

*Harry's eyes scanned the morning edition of the *Prophet* and he smiled at some of the things Felice Garnet had said about him. He was seated at the Gryffindor table for breakfast, but today was going to be a busy day. He had big plans, the least of all going to see*

Dumbledore. Not many were seated near him though, but it was no longer out of fear of the consequences. They didn't know what to say to him, and Harry would cross those bridges later. Turning the page, he saw another story about him.

## ***HERO OR VILLIAN, THE TRUTH OF HARRY POTTER***

*Rita Skeeter*

*By now most of our magical community is aware of the devastating attack on Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry yesterday morning. Dark magic was heavy in the air and grounds of the school, from more than one force. Death Eaters and Aurors clashed, many falling on either side.*

*Both sides however, were held at wand point as He Who Must Not Be Named duelled with Albus Dumbledore. For reasons unknown, Albus Dumbledore was fighting a losing battle, and his death seemed imminent.*

*And yet it was not to be. A mysterious stranger, cloaked in black that matched the Death Eaters, stepped forward to challenge the Dark Lord.*

*Harry Potter, born July 31<sup>st</sup> 1980, reported to have been killed six years ago at the hands of the very wizard he beat into submission yesterday, faced You Know Who without showing any sign of fear or doubt. Some may see this as strange, as many adult wizards cannot look upon the Dark Lord for long without feeling understandably afraid.*

*Much is still unknown about the apparent duel between Potter and You Know Who, but sources close to Potter say he used some fairly dark magic against the Dark Lord, raising worries and questions that this duel may have been a sign of things to come. Harry Potter has power, that much is*

*clear,  
but whether he has a right to use it in darkness should not be a  
choice that  
he should be allowed to make freely.*

*We are at war now because You Know Who ran unchecked in the  
early years.  
Can we learn from our past mistakes, and collar Potter before he  
usurps  
the Dark Lord, and claims that mantle for his own.*

"You bitch..." breathed Harry, crushing the paper in his hands and tearing it in two. He was definitely going to give *Rita Skeeter* a piece of his mind next time he ran into her. *Cloaked as a Death Eater... collar Potter before he usurps the Dark Lord!* He wondered briefly if she was an unregistered Animagus in this world, fluttering around unchecked as a beetle. *Wouldn't be surprised* he thought quietly, and began to chew on his bacon roll, wishing pain upon Rita Skeeter.

"Harry..." a voice said nervously to his right.

Harry turned and saw that Ron had moved up the bench to sit next to him, and that everyone had taken notice of this, silence spread through the Hall like wildfire. "Yes?"

Ron was very self conscious of the entire Hall listening in on his brief conversation with Harry Potter, who was an unspoken hero to almost all of the students in the school. His fame had skyrocketed instantly as soon as he challenged Voldemort yesterday.

"Do you... do you still wanna play some Quidditch this weekend?" Ron asked weakly.

Harry's thoughts instantly flew to the Nimbus broom he had cast aside near Hagrid's cabin, and then to the fact that Ron had been ignoring him for the most part this last week, out of fear that Malfoy will tell his father who he associated with. Harry had read in the *Prophet* that Voldemort's entire inner circle was being held in separate Ministry holding cells.

Harry smiled. "Sure... why not?" he said.

Ron smiled and then for a moment forgot himself and slapped Harry on the back. "Excellent," he said. "What was it you said you played, Seeker?" Harry was smiling slightly as he nodded. "Well our Seeker won't be here next year so it would probably be good to start scouting for fresh blood now."

Harry blinked and turned away. *He wouldn't be here next year, if the equinox in November proved to be useful.* "We'll see what happens," he said, turning to Ron. "I may not be here next year, as I've got more than one demon to take care of... but we'll just see."

Ron nodded and scratched the back of his neck. "Why... why did you fight him yesterday, Harry?" he then asked quietly, unable to put into words the fear he had felt upon seeing the Dark Lord, and yet Harry had duelled him.

"You shouldn't fear him," Harry replied. "He's nothing more than a murderer. I fought because it was the right thing to do, the right choice to make. The easy choice would have been to walk away. Remember that for the future, Ron, because I had a friend once who was just like you, and he knew how to make the right choice."

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"Harry!" smiled Dumbledore, sitting up in his hospital bed. "How wonderful to see you."

"Hello, Professor," Harry said, unable to keep the smile of his face at the unrelenting cheerfulness the headmaster seemed to exude. "How are you?"

"Thanks to you, Harry, I am alive," he replied, coughing slightly. "And from a certain recording that Sirius showed me this morning, you are lucky to be here as well."

"Was that on a pair of omnioculars, by any chance?" Harry asked, levitating a chair over so he could sit down next to Dumbledore.

"Indeed," Dumbledore answered. "Never in all my long years have I seen such a display of power, Harry. You have been keeping many things hidden from us."

Harry stretched his arm out to keep the circulation going as he felt it once again going numb. "I told you not to doubt me; that I could handle Voldemort."

"And you were right," agreed Dumbledore, sipping a clear potion from a vial in front of him. "A replenishing potion," he said. "Poppy has me taking them on the hour. Apparently I came to within an inch of death."

Harry chuckled at the mirth he saw in the headmaster's eyes. "I know how that feels," he said.

"Harry?" a voice called from the Matron's office.

Harry looked up and saw his mother standing in the doorway, silhouetted against the glow of some potion being brewed behind her. "Hello," said Harry as Lily walked over to him and Dumbledore.

"Is everything okay?" she asked, looking pointedly at Harry's outstretched arm.

"Everything's fine," Harry said. "I just came to see Professor Dumbledore. My arm feels a bit numb though."

"Pierced by a silver arrow, if the recording was accurate," said Dumbledore.

"It was," Lily said concernedly, muttering some small spells over Harry's exposed arm. It glowed blue for a moment and then green, before settling back to normal. "Nothing is overly wrong with your arm," she said. "I think the numbness must be part of the healing process."

Harry nodded. "Thanks," he replied.

Lily smiled. "I have to get back to the potions," she said quietly. "I'll leave you two alone. Don't tire him out, Albus," she said finally, smiling happily.

"Fear not, Lily," Dumbledore said. "I do believe it would take more than the few words of an old man to tire young Harry."

Lily disappeared back into the matron's office and Harry turned back to Dumbledore. "How long you stuck in here for then?" he asked.

"A few days bed rest," Dumbledore replied. "I dare not dispute it. Poppy can be quite a formidable opponent in her wrath."

Harry smiled from experience. He had always argued with the Hogwarts matron over the length of time he was required to stay in this infirmary.

"I believe you have some issues on your mind, Harry," continued Dumbledore. "And we would all sleep better if they were addressed sooner rather than later."

Harry nodded, although he doubted he would ever sleep as well as he had done before the Triwizard tournament again. Too much had been lost in that godforsaken graveyard. "I actually did need to speak to you about some rather... important things," he said.

Dumbledore reached over to his bed side table and picked up his half moon spectacles, placing them on his face. "What can I help you with, Harry?"

Harry sighed and for a brief moment looked out of the window into the spring sky. It was the 5<sup>th</sup> of April today, and Harry had been sixteen days out of his own world. He had months ahead of him. "I've been thinking," he began. "In this world, I'm stronger than Voldemort, than anyone. I want to go on the offensive. I promised myself that as long as I was alive I'd fight Riddle, and now I, we, hold an advantage."

"Go on," said Dumbledore seriously. His brow furrowed in thought as he listened to what Harry said next.

"I can end this war now, if only I had a target. I don't think we should wait until Voldemort attacks again and people die needlessly until I find him. We have to find him now, wherever this- this Slytherin Castle is we need to find it or draw him out."

Dumbledore was silent for a moment before speaking. "Yesterday, Harry," he began, his ancient voice full of wisdom. "You showed bravery, courage, and leadership beyond doubt. I do not believe you

meant to take control yesterday, but everyone was following you. You hadn't asked them to and nobody knew you well enough for it to have happened, and yet it did."

He paused there and looked at Harry beyond his half-moon spectacles before continuing. "Why are you asking me to do this, Harry? I think if you asked them to, the Aurors would follow you, the Ministry would try and find Slytherin castle, and give you command of the battle."

Harry was silent now. "I... I asked you because you usually tell me what to do in these situations. I wouldn't be here today if you hadn't taken certain steps to protect me as a child, and guided me through Hogwarts in the early years."

Dumbledore blinked and placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "That was not me. I failed you in this world, Harry. We all did..."

Harry stretched his tired limbs and lifted his glasses, rubbing his equally tired eyes that seemed to carry permanent black rings around them. "What should I do...?" he eventually asked quietly, almost regretfully.

"There will come a time, Harry," Dumbledore began. "When you will leave our world, and return to your own war. The one you should be fighting now. I fear you may have to carry the weight of that world as you did this one yesterday, and it will be an infinite number of times heavier. Making these decisions for yourself now, will ultimately help you against a much stronger adversary than this world has offered you."

Harry nodded in a brief moment of understanding but something else was gnawing at his mind, making it impossible to think clearly. "You're right about a stronger adversary," he said quietly. "On the... on the last day I spent in my own world, I fought another battle against Voldemort and eight hundred or so Death Eaters. We had about as many Aurors but... hundreds, even thousands died that day."

And what did you do?" asked the headmaster.



"Voldemort had taken my closest friends captive. He was in the forbidden forest, ready to open the doorway that leads to other worlds. He didn't know it would do that though, he thought it would have destroyed Hogwarts... it would have as well, if I hadn't stepped into it. Anyway... before that I was duelling with him, and you have to understand this Voldemort was resurrected, reborn, he looks completely different from the Voldemort of this world."

"How...?" asked Dumbledore, having remained silent so far through Harry's story.

"He used my blood," Harry sighed. "Forcibly taken. That strengthened him because of the power I've got. Blood has something to do with it anyway...."

"And that is why he is more powerful than-"

"One of the reasons," Harry said quickly. "Another is that he -er- received some of my pure magic that day we duelled last, in the Forbidden forest."

"Why did this happen?" Dumbledore then asked.

Harry sighed. "I lost the duel. He stabbed me right through the shoulder with the sword of Gryffindor. I was impaled upon my own weapon."

Dumbledore's eyes widened in surprise. "It came out of the Hat?"

Harry nodded. "Anyway, I was dying on the ground of that forest when Gin- when my closest friend ran into the clearing, to help me. Voldemort turned his wand on her of course, and fired the Killing Curse at her."

"I'm sorry..." Dumbledore began.

"Don't be," Harry said, waving away the pity. "Something erupted inside of me as I realised she was about to die, and in an instant I went from lying on the floor to being bathed in silver light, standing in front of the path of Voldemort's killing curse."

"You Apparated?" asked Dumbledore.

Harry shook his head. "No... I simply appeared where I was needed, right in front of the curse. I was glowing with silver light though, and the curse hit me in the chest, ripping away the protection of the pure magic... I think... it may have been something else." *He didn't say Love Magic.* "Anyway, the curse dissipated on my chest and tore some pure magic from me, which hit Voldemort."

"I would have said that was impossible," Dumbledore whispered. "But I see the truth in your eyes. Go on..."

Harry nodded. "He fled after the pure magic had *eaten* into him, joining him. But he had already activated the blood magic portal to destroy Hogwarts."

"And you sacrificed yourself to it," offered Dumbledore, guessing his mind.

Harry nodded. "I couldn't perform even a summoning charm at that point. I'd just lost some of my power to Voldemort and survived the Avada Kedavra curse again. All I could do to save the school, the world, was to abandon it and step into the circle of light."

"And you are understandably worried that Voldemort may destroy the world while you are gone, using the power you did not mean for him to receive."

Harry nodded almost imperceptibly. "It's all I can think about..." he whispered. "I can't get back to my world and I gave Voldemort the power to destroy it."

Dumbledore blinked and sat up further in his bed, looking Harry directly in his eyes. "I have nothing to say that can ease your mind, other than the hope that this magic you gave him would take time to utilise, to control. From what you described a moment ago I think it would be safe to say this transfer of power nearly destroyed Tom?" he said, raising his eyebrows questioningly.

"He nearly died," Harry nodded, thinking back to the final moments he had spent inside Voldemort's mind. He was weakened. "He would need to recover... it could take months."

"Hope is your guiding force now, Harry," Dumbledore said, offering a small smile. "Grasp it tightly, and wait for your chance to return home."

Harry took a deep, shuddering breath. Now that he had told Dumbledore some of his fears he felt better. Not happy, but the weight of it all seemed to lessen. "What should I do between then and now though?"

"You should do what is right, although I believe you already know your path now and how you are going to spend your remaining months with us," Dumbledore's eyes twinkled behind his glasses.

Harry nodded shakily in agreement. "I don't think I ever told you how much I appreciate your advice," Harry said quietly, his eyes glazing over with tears that would never be shed. "You're right, of course. I have to play Quidditch."

Dumbledore laughed quietly, a chuckle under his breath that turned into a painful cough. "Not everything can be a joke, Harry," Dumbledore then said seriously.

Harry shrugged. "For me it has to be, otherwise I fear I'd go insane." He tried to sound nonchalant but Dumbledore could sense the undeniable truth in his words.

"Rest for a few days," the headmaster said. "Relax, get to know your family better before dealing with the problems of the world."

Harry shook his head. "I don't think I can," he replied. "I'm not really one for family. Although you have helped me decide what to do today, sir," he continued. "I'm going to the Ministry."

Dumbledore sighed and took another sip of his potion, on the hour. "Something tells me they'll come to you first," he said, looking up to the high window.

Harry frowned and followed his gaze, just as an impressive eagle-owl flew in through the open window and landed neatly on his shoulder, an elegantly styled missive attached to its leg.

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## Chapter 8 - And Justice For All

Lady Justice has been raped  
Truth assassin  
Rolls of red tape seal your lips  
Now you're done in  
Their money tips her scales again  
Make your deal  
Just what is truth? I cannot tell  
Cannot feel

~~ *Metallica*

The brown eagle-owl landed lightly on Harry's shoulder, its brown wing brushing the side of his face as it screeched impressively, holding out its leg.

Harry removed the letter and the bird screeched again, before launching itself off Harry's shoulder, and back out into the warm spring sky.

"A Wizengamot bird," said Dumbledore, a grave note in his voice.

Harry didn't say anything. He broke the red wax seal and removed the fine piece of parchment from within and began to read. His eyes scanned the fine print quickly, and as Dumbledore watched he saw a frown develop on young Harry's forehead.

*Dear Mr. Potter,*

*We hope you receive this letter in good health. The Wizengamot, under Wizarding law, requires your presence on the 8<sup>th</sup> of April, to discuss matters pertaining to the events of the 4<sup>th</sup> of April. After correspondence and discussions with the head of the Auror Department, Remus John Lupin, you are hereby summoned to the trial of fifteen Death Eaters to deliver your statement of the capture of said dark wizards.*

*We understand that you played a significant role in the aforementioned event of April 4<sup>th</sup>, and a full statement pertaining to*

*your actions will be presented summarily before the entire procession of the Wizengamot.*

*Your actions, whilst effective, broke several Wizarding laws and your character is to be judged by the Wizengamot after the aforementioned Death Eater trials.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Bartemius  
Minister of Magic*

*Crouch*

*Sr.*

Harry read the letter once again and then scanned all of the names at the bottom of the page, under Minister Crouch's. *Cornelius Fudge... Frank Longbottom... Mafalda Hopkirk...* All the members of the Wizengamot had signed it.

Tapping the parchment against his leg thoughtfully, Harry frowned and then passed the parchment to Dumbledore, who read it quickly.

"Either they read Rita Skeeter," said Harry slowly, as Dumbledore folded the letter in half. "Or they're scared," he finished, smiling slightly.

Dumbledore wasn't smiling. "They called this meeting without my approval," he said gravely.

"Are they allowed to do that?" asked Harry.

Dumbledore nodded. "A majority vote can be cast, and it appears that it was."

Harry shrugged and stood up. "They're trying to control me," he said after a moments thought. "The Ministry, the Wizengamot, they don't want me fighting without their approval."

"Very perceptive, Harry," stated Dumbledore. "You are, of course, correct."

Harry shook his head slowly. "I bet it's the same across any world," he whispered. "One power trying to destroy or control another...."

"This time I *fear* you are correct," Dumbledore said solemnly. "What do you plan to do?"

Harry cracked his knuckles and looked Dumbledore in the eye. "Oh I'm going to this- this *meeting*, as they put it, and we'll see how much control they get!"

Nodding his goodbye, Harry turned and swept out of the infirmary angrily. *Can't just be happy that I nearly killed Voldemort, can they?* he thought, abandoning all desire to head to Charms that morning. Instead he turned towards the Entrance Hall, and from there down to Hagrid's cabin, to claim something he left behind.

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Soaring high above the colourful stands of the Hogwarts Quidditch pitch, Harry fell into a fast dive on his Nimbus 2000, hoping to reclaim some of the rush he had felt when jumping out of Dumbledore's office window.

The wind howled in his ears as he fell through the cloudless sky towards the green striped pitch. He wrapped his legs tightly around the broom and threw his arms back up into the sky carelessly. His right arm he couldn't lift far because of the bandages but it still felt good to just freefall again.

The grass of the ground was approaching fast though, and at the last possible moment Harry pulled out of the dive, creating a loud *swoosh* that rippled through the air. All his thoughts and problems seemed to take a back seat to the joy of flight, and for a few brief moments Harry forgot about the war he so affectionately called life.

Gliding lazily above the earth, Harry slowly floated down and alighted on one of the many stands surrounding the pitch. He sat down tiredly and observed the three hoops at one end of the pitch, looking through them and once again into a dark and uncertain future.

It was then, as an unexpected stretch of dark rain cloud obscured the light coming from the sun, that Harry recalled several words Firenze the centaur had spoken to him back in his own world. *The woman he*

*loved would die, yet live again... Billions will die as the surface of the planet of War runs crimson... He would cease to be a part of his world.*

Well, he thought. *That last one has held true... what of the others?* Harry spent a good hour just staring into the sky and thinking, and finally came to the conclusion that he would face whatever was coming, as it came. And right now, the Ministry seemed to be proving a bigger threat than Voldemort. Dark Wizards he could handle, small-minded politicians was another challenge altogether.

With a wave of his hand, Harry shrunk the Nimbus down to pocket size and placed it in his jeans pocket. He then descended through the stands and set off back across the grounds towards the castle, as the sky once again cleared.

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"*Crucio!*" hissed the Dark Lord, his fury and anger once again being taken out on one of his lesser Death Eaters.

The robed man screamed in pain as his nerves exploded and his skin melted. Voldemort held the connection for a full minute before dismissing the crippled Death Eater with a wave of his hand. He retired to his throne, sat atop a dark podium against the black wall of the largest hall in the fortress of Slytherin.

His thoughts were dark and destructive as they all came back to that Potter boy, who had shamed him in front of his world. Victory had been so close. Dumbledore was at his mercy, but no... Fifty Death Eaters were in Ministry holding cells, including his entire inner circle and another fifty were dead. The Dark Lord hated his first real taste of loss.

"At least Azkaban is open to us," he hissed into the darkness. "My inner circle will return soon enough."

"The Dementors grow restless on the island," another voice whispered in the darkness to Voldemort's left. "With only a handful of Aurors on which to feed, they may leave the island soon, father."



"The Dementor's will do as I command," Voldemort replied fiercely, waving his hand dismissively.

"What of Harry Potter?" the voice in the darkness then asked.

The fire in the Dark Lord's eyes burnt with a vengeful fury. "He has become your new task. Eliminate him! Use any means at your disposal, just make sure he dies." Voldemort felt the boy, his son, disapparate and then summoned another Death Eater into the throne room. His anger had not yet abated.

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"He was unbelievable," James stated simply, taking a sip from the glass of firewhiskey he had just poured himself from the liquor cabinet in his and Lily's quarters. "Every other duel I've ever seen pales in comparison."

Lily nodded and fell onto the bed next to James, resting her head on his shoulder. She hadn't slept in over forty hours. There had been too many of the injured to look after in the infirmary. Thankfully, most of them had been transported to St. Mungo's and she could get some sleep.

Lily had not had much chance to talk to James either, as he had been teaching all day. With Dumbledore down for the count, the deputy Headmaster, Flitwick, had been quick to assume command and had made sure classes resumed as normal only one day after the battle. That had been today, and it had been one of the longest days Lily could ever remember.

She had only seen Harry briefly that morning when he had come to talk to Dumbledore. "He is a powerful wizard..." she said sleepily, kicking off her shoes.

James shook his head slowly. "Beyond powerful..." he whispered. "There's something deep inside of him, Lily," he then said concernedly. "A deeper power than I think even he knows."

"He's still a boy," Lily said. "Despite all his power he still has feelings.... did you see him today?"

"No," breathed James. "He didn't show up for his lessons, although all of my students kept asking after him."

Lily bit her bottom lip and sighed heavily. "There are demons in his past, James," she whispered. "Horrors I think he could never tell us."

"I have no doubt of that," James replied, laughing hopelessly. "First time we saw him he was covered in scars... and then there's that wound in his shoulder that's not been given a chance to heal. He has definitely survived events beyond what we know."

Lily was silent for a long moment as James ran a hand through her hair repetitively, as he had done for years. "The Ministry are trying to keep him under their control," she stated. "Albus showed me a letter from Crouch and the Wizengamot. He's to attend the Death Eater trials in two days, on the 8<sup>th</sup>, after which they are going to judge his character, as they put it..." she ended bitterly.

James removed the glasses from his face and placed them on his bedside table. "They're never going to control him. If he can hold his own against Voldemort then the Wizengamot should be no problem," James rubbed his tired eyes. "How are Melissa and Michael?"

"They seemed fine at dinner," she whispered as the two of them finally leaned back on the bed. Lily draped a comforting arm over James' chest as her exhaustion began to claim her. "A little shook up, but then who isn't?"

"Harry isn't," he said and then extinguished the torches in their room.

One hundred feet to the left and then up from his parent's quarters, Harry lay calmly on the bench up atop the Astronomy tower, staring unblinking at the vastness of the stars and creation around him. A warm breeze ruffled his hair and Harry absentmindedly passed a small ball of electric blue magic from one hand to the other.

His thoughts were surprisingly clear, and for the first time in weeks Harry thought of nothing but the starlight that was reflected lazily off of his wire framed glasses. It never ceased to amaze him how clear the night sky was at Hogwarts. At night, when all the lights in the castle went out, the darkness was complete, and laying there Harry

could see thousands upon thousands of small pinpricks of silver starlight.

Five years of astronomy lessons had taught him the names and constellations of dozens of them, and he easily picked out the planets Mars, Jupiter, and Venus, blinking ever so coldly upon him, millions of miles away. It stretched on for miles across the Earth though, a blanket of shining dots that nothing in the cloudless sky could cover.

Harry simply stared into the sky, into the vastness of a universe that he didn't belong in. It stretched for infinity all around him, but it was just one universe in a stack of many. How many Harry didn't know, but he knew that this was the wrong one. He wondered briefly where this universe was, where it stood in creation. If everything was in the universe, and he was from another universe altogether, then what space did his universe live in....?

Harry started to get a headache just thinking about all the possibilities when he thought of time and space, and where he now fit into it, being able to travel across the boundary of it all. One thing was certain though, however much power he did or could wield, he still felt infinitesimally small and insignificant against the majesty of these stars, whichever universe they belonged to.

Forgetting the stars, Harry closed his eyes and his thoughts slowly spilled over into the war of this world, and the Wizengamot interrogation (as he thought of it) on Saturday, the 8<sup>th</sup>. It meant he would miss the Quidditch match for the cup between Gryffindor and Slytherin, but that couldn't be helped. What mattered this Saturday was making sure none of the corruption he knew to be in the Ministry surfaced and the Death Eaters were freed.

The warm breeze once again blew his hair about his head, and Harry sat up on the bench, extinguishing his sphere of blue light as he did. He could hear voices and footsteps down in the tower behind him but he ignored it. His mind was already focusing on the monumental tasks that lay before him.

*I have to kill Voldemort... he thought. In two worlds... who decided that?*

Harry rested his hand on his pocket and felt the smooth polished wood of his wand. He recalled the wand holster that Ron had given him for Christmas nearly five months ago. As far as Harry knew it lay unused in his trunk at the foot of his bed in the dorm of the other world. As did his other magical items, the Marauder's Map, his invisibility cloak, the rest of his dragon armour. His chest piece, which he had worn through the boundary, had been beyond repair once Madam Pomfrey had peeled it off him and healed his shoulder as best she could. That was long gone.

Harry stood up and walked lazily over to the wall on the balcony. He rested his palms flat against it and leaned over the edge, staring at the blinking lights in the distance that were Hogsmeade village. Yawning, Harry thought it might be time he went to bed and turned to do just that.

He descended the astronomy tower quickly, staying clear of the classroom where a bunch of third years were preparing their telescopes for a night of viewing the stars. It wasn't that long of a walk back towards Gryffindor tower, and when Harry got there he found the common room nearly deserted, with only a few seventh years seated near the fire. A glance at the clock above the fireplace told him it was approaching ten thirty. He shook his head of tiredness and made his way up to the familiar, yet different bed in the sixth year dorm.

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Thursday the 6<sup>th</sup> of April was no different from the 5<sup>th</sup>. Harry rose early, as was his way, and showered briefly before heading down to breakfast, with his brother Michael. He studiously ignored the majority of stares and muttered whispers he heard about him as he past students in the corridors, and sat in the Great Hall.

Michael was talking to him about the Quidditch final, and Harry was listening vacantly, paying closer attention to Dumbledore, who had risen from the hospital wing to attend breakfast in the Great Hall that morning. It seemed he didn't want to appear out of it for too long, and that was good in the long run.

"Gryffindor should win," Michael said hesitantly. "But last time they played Ginny missed the snitch by a few seconds. Slytherin still haven't let us forget it...."

Harry nodded. "I think they might have a bit more confidence this time around," he replied. "What with half the Slytherin team having their dads on trial for murder and the like this Saturday."

Michael snorted into his pumpkin juice. "Yeah... that might be a bit of an advantage."

Harry cut one of his Cumberland sausages into quarters and skewered a piece with his fork, when he felt someone brush his shoulder lightly. He bit back a gasp of pain as his wound was disturbed and turned to see who had tapped his shoulder.

"Hello, Harry," whispered Hermione, smiling politely as she sat down next to him.

"Hi," Harry replied, turning to face her. "How are things?"

Hermione shrugged. "I just... wanted to thank you," she said. "For saving my life that morning, when you jumped in front of the Curse and pulled me away from it."

Harry nodded. "I remember. How are you?"

"Still in a bit of shock," she said shakily, brushing some of her bushy hair back out of her face. "I came to see how you were feeling?"

Harry blinked. "Me?" he repeated. "I'm fine, bit of a sore arm but besides that... I'll live."

Hermione smiled again and Ron took a seat opposite her at the table. "That's good."

"We didn't see you in Charms," Ron then said, pulling the jug of milk towards himself. "Or DADA yesterday."

Harry nodded lazily. "Never went," he replied. "Couldn't be bothered, to tell you the truth. I don't think anybody missed me."

"Malfoy did," Hermione whispered warningly. "He's plotting against you, Harry."

Shrugging, Harry sipped his pumpkin juice. "He must have been born stupid," he said, shaking his head. "Thanks for the warning though."

"No problem," beamed Hermione, and Ron smiled as well. "Are you going to attend Transfiguration this morning?" she then asked. "We're starting to study the practical aspects of the Animagus transformation."

Harry nodded. "Yeah, I'll be there."

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"What you have to remember," Sirius said, transforming quickly into Padfoot and then back. "Is that not everyone has the ability inside of them to become an Animagus."

Harry sat attentively up the front on the far left of the Transfiguration room, ignoring the stares and muttered whisperings he heard from around the room. Ron and Hermione had decided to sit next to him and all the other Gryffindors had performed a half-circle of bodies around him, and Harry knew why. Everyone had heard of the Slytherin plot to... *discredit* Harry... and the Gryffindors were showing the courage and bravery that their house promoted by creating a human shield between Harry and the rest of the room.

"I doubt more than a handful of you in this room have the innate ability to transform," Sirius continued. "And those that do, you probably won't make it right to the end of the training process, as it is extremely difficult."

Thinking back, Harry hadn't found his transformation difficult, as his magic had taken care of it for him. All he had to do was touch the griffin and magic had done the rest. He hadn't transformed in about three weeks, ever since that final day in his universe. Harry smiled as he recalled the feeling of completeness that flying as a griffin brought.

"I will be outlining the steps you can take in your own time that will discern whether or not you possess the ability. This is homework, by

the way," Sirius smiled, and flicked his wand at the powdery chalkboard. Chalk lines whirled their way across it and Harry dutifully took notes on a scrap of parchment. "Next lesson is... Monday?"

"It is," Hermione responded.

"Well this should only take you a few hours over the weekend," said Sirius. "So take your time, don't rush it. Just try and grow your hair, or shorten your fingernails or something like that. You don't have to accomplish all the steps on the board and it will be remarkable if any of you do, one is enough to discover if you have the ability to be an Animagus."

Harry put his quill down and shook his sore arm, dispelling the pins and needles he felt in his hands from the lack of circulation. He knew he didn't have to bother with this homework, as he could just simply say he didn't have the ability. It was a lie, but the information it was protecting was more important. *Never show your hand until the last possible moment....*

"You know," whispered Ron thoughtfully. "I think I may have changed my hair once, back in first year..."

"Wouldn't it be amazing to be able to transform," Hermione said wistfully. "Transform into something like a bird, something that can fly."

"Like a phoenix..." Harry whispered, thinking of Fawkes.

"Exactly," Hermione replied. "A phoenix... that would be incredible. It is very rare to be able to transform into a magical creature."

Harry turned to look in her eyes. "Really?" he said, raising his eyebrows in mild surprise. "What... like a Griffin... or a Krup, a basilisk maybe?"

"A basilisk!" choked Ron. "Who in their right mind would ever want to be a basilisk?!"

"That does seem very unlikely, even real basilisks are rare in the world these days. There's not been one sighted in centuries,"

Hermione quoted directly out of the magical creature's text in her head.

"Thank Merlin," Ron said with relief.

Harry inwardly smiled. "There could be many underground though," he said. "I mean they can live for hundreds of years."

"That's true," Hermione stated, looking at Harry with respect. "I would have thought you only knew about physical magic, strength spells and curses."

"I'm not just a grunt with a wand," Harry said, smiling slightly. "And I do know a bit about basilisks."

Ron shuddered. "Why would you want to?" he replied.

Harry slapped him on the back and winked. "In case I ever meet one."

"They are rather fascinating creatures though," continued Hermione. "Can grow to a huge size and only a Parselmouth can control them."

"Only a dark wizard then," Ron spat. "Who's bright idea was it to create basilisks and then have only evil wizards with the ability to control them!?"

"Voldemort's a parseltongue," Harry said unexpectedly, sighing heavily.

Both Ron and Hermione visibly flinched. "Let's talk about something else," Ron said. "We hear enough about him as it is."

Harry silently agreed, as did Hermione. "Well I can't play any Quidditch this weekend, I'm afraid," Harry then said.

"Why not?" asked Ron.

Harry sighed. "The Wizengamot, in its infinite wisdom," he said sarcastically. "Has summoned me to attend the inner circle Death Eater trials this weekend, and to judge my character."



Hermione visibly paled. "Oh... those trials are always - always... well, *witch* hunts," she said, no pun intended. "They don't like you fighting without their permission."

"I know that," agreed Harry. "But I'm not going to let them walk all over me."

"I wouldn't argue with the Wizengamot, Harry," Ron said warningly.

"I won't," Harry replied. "As long as they don't step out of line."

The rest of that particular Transfiguration lesson past by in a blur of normality. Harry copied his notes, so as not to arouse anybody's curiosity, and chatted quietly to Ron and Hermione about the Wizengamot and Gryffindor's prospects for the Quidditch cup. Soon enough though the siren rang that ended the lesson, and Harry stood up and began to make his way out into the corridor with his fellow Gryffindors.

The corridors were, of course, packed with students of all years as they walked to their next lesson. This was one of Harry's first true appearances to the school at large, besides the meals in the Great Hall, and most people did a double-take as they briefly glanced at him and Harry did do his best to ignore them.

Potions was his next lesson and Harry suffered through that slowly, ignoring the glares of hate and malice that Snape sent his way. He worked with Ron and Hermione on the potion that, when diluted, created Veritaserum. It was quite possibly the most complex potion Harry had ever come across, but the three of them completed the first stage adequately nonetheless.

At lunch, Harry was pleased to hear that Dumbledore had made a full recovery, thanks to Madam Pomfrey's potions, and also that he had resumed his duties as Headmaster. It was a boost to moral around the school that Dumbledore, who represented the Light against Voldemort, was still strong enough to continue the fight.

That afternoon Harry had a double period of Charms, which he breezed through easily as it was defensive magic. After Charms and dinner, Harry spent the first true night in weeks talking with his friends

in the common room. He was, of course, something of a hero to the Gryffindors, but that didn't stop him from playing chess with Ron, or helping Hermione with her shield charms.

In fact, since he had proven himself against the Dark Lord, all of his former sixth year friends had warmed up to him considerably, and he spent the night forging friendships with these familiar, yet different people. He discussed Divination with Parvati and Lavender, he allowed Colin to take his picture with his brother Dennis. Dean asked if he followed the Muggle football, and when Harry said he didn't, Dean and Seamus filled him in on the current Quidditch league table.

Then there was also Neville, who Harry realised had parents in this world whose minds were as sane as the next person. He was a lot more confident, a lot more sure of himself. And he could perform more complex magic than the Neville Harry knew would have doubted himself on. Although Harry knew that this Neville had strength in him that this new Neville probably possessed at some level. They were both good people, they were both the *same* person, and Harry was happy he had begun a new friendship with him.

It was a long night, and Harry walked up to the dorm tiredly with Ron at eleven-thirty. They said their goodnights, and Harry's head hit the pillow happily. Life until the next equinox had just gotten a whole lot brighter. In the past two days he had beaten and discredited Voldemort and his claim of immortality, captured the entire inner circle, forged blossoming friendships with his old friends, and managed to avoid cursing anything since the attack.

Sleep took Harry quickly as these thoughts swirled through his mind, and for the first time in months, he didn't have a single nightmare or troubled dream.

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Harry awoke the next morning refreshed and he showered quickly before heading down to the common room at seven o'clock. It was the first time since he had begun to sleep in the common room again that he wasn't the first down of a morning. The sun shone in through the windows with its early morning light as Harry stepped off the stairs and into the room.

He was greeted with warm smiles and awe-filled glances as the Gryffindors noticed his presence. And he yawned, shaking off the effects of a good night's sleep, before heading over to his familiar armchair by the fire.

"Hey, Harry," Michael Potter said as he sat down.

Harry turned and saw his younger brother seated a couple of armchairs over with a group of second years. "How's things, Michael?" he asked.

"Fine," he replied. "Mum was looking for you though. She said Dumbledore wanted to speak with you."

Harry nodded and as if that was the cue, a large fireball sprang into existence above the fireplace and from it flew Fawkes, sparks igniting a fiery trail in his wake. The phoenix circled the common room once and there were many gasps and compliments paid to Fawkes, who swooped down majestically to land on the arm of Harry's chair.

"Hello, Fawkes," Harry said, inclining his head to the intelligent creature.

Fawkes sang a hello and then dropped a note onto Harry's lap that he had grasped in his talons. Harry picked it up and read it quickly.

*Harry,*

*Please come to my office as soon as possible,*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Albus Dumbledore*

Harry nodded slowly and then scrunched up the note, throwing it into the nearby fire. "Tell him I'll be there in about quarter of an hour," he then told Fawkes, having no doubts that the Headmaster would be able to infer the message through the link he shared with the amazing bird, his familiar.

Not wasting any time as Fawkes vanished in another ball of flames - the signature mark of the instant travel Phoenix's were capable of - Harry said a brief goodbye to Michael and exited the Gryffindor common room. Dumbledore's study was a good ten minutes walk away so Harry set off quickly through the cold morning halls of the castle.

He didn't pass many people on the way to the Headmaster's office, and those he did were heading in the opposite direction towards the Great Hall for the first meal of the day, breakfast. Looking out a few of the windows as he walked down the corridor that led to the stone guardian of Dumbledore's office, Harry beheld the Hogwarts grounds. A long trail of burnt grass, plants, and trees could be seen near Hagrid's cabin, which had had to be repaired slightly after the attack, and it looked like a long, jagged scar on the otherwise green and fresh grounds.

Shaking his head, Harry once again recalled the battle of only two days ago, and the sights, sound, smells and feelings he had felt on that day. Sometimes the things he did seemed surreal, even to him. It was like he became faster when battles broke out. It had only taken him a split second on that morning two days ago to decide to jump out of the window in Dumbledore's office, which he was now approaching. And the wall of stunners he had created that had wiped out the inner circle. That had been experimental at best, but it worked.

Harry knew he was becoming quite efficient at fighting these large battles in this war. He knew he would have to implement different tactics if he wanted to stay ahead of the enemy, especially when he returned to his own world. Without a shadow of a doubt, Harry also knew that the Voldemort he would return to would be stronger, faster, and more powerful than any of the incarnations he had previously faced of the Dark Lord.

That Voldemort also had fifty or so more years experience in magic than he did, so if he was going to have any chance of beating him, Harry would have to employ some quick tactics and spells that Voldemort would not expect.

Once again deciding that these thoughts could wait until later, Harry ascended the stairs to the Headmaster's office. He didn't have to worry about the password, as he had been expected and the gargoyle had been prematurely activated. The great oak doors at the top of the stairs were also open, and Harry's arrival was noticed by the three familiar people in the study.

"Hello, Harry," said Lily and James, seated in front of Dumbledore's desk in large velvet back-chairs that were placed on an angle parallel to the front two corners of the desk. There was a third chair in the middle, between that of his parents that Harry knew was for him.

"Morning," Harry replied, walking over to Dumbledore and his parents.

"Please have a seat, Harry," Dumbledore motioned to the chair opposite from him.

Harry nodded and sat down, looking to all of them in turn. "Is this about the Wizengamot trials tomorrow?" he asked, unable to think of another reason as to why he would have been called up to the office.

James nodded. "We need to prepare you for whatever they might ask, and they will be asking a lot of questions."

Harry understood that. "Who are 'they'?" he asked. "Who is in charge of the trials?"

"The Minister of Magic, Crouch, is overseeing these particular trials personally, as it is the inner circle. He will also be presiding over your... evaluation."

"Okay," Harry said, but there had been something bugging him for a day or two now. "Why are the Death Eaters on trial?" he asked, looking to Dumbledore and then James and Lily. "I mean, aren't they all guilty, shouldn't they just be sentenced?"

"Some of them claimed innocence, for obvious reasons," Lily answered. "Lucius Malfoy is a Death Eater, but there has never been any evidence to convict him. He's now claiming that he was under Imperius so he can keep his position of power and not have to go into hiding or Azkaban."

"And they believed him!?" Harry exclaimed.

"They had to," shrugged James. "He is entitled to a trial, and he has the galleons to employ the best defence lawyers, he may get off on the Imperius plea."

Harry gritted his teeth in frustration, but he held his anger in check. "How many other Death Eaters have done the same?"

Dumbledore shook his head as if lost in thought, or confused. "It is strange," he said. "Only a handful of those captured pleaded innocent and under Imperius. The rest went quietly and are already in Azkaban."

"Why is that strange?" Harry then asked.

"Because only those, such as Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle, hold positions of relative power in our government, and galleons to influence decisions made by the Ministry. Now that might not seem odd in itself, but several other members of the inner circle that you captured, Harry, were not known before that. They could have pleaded innocence, but chose life in Azkaban instead."

As Dumbledore finished Harry began to draw some conclusions to this behaviour in his head, but it was too early to jump to anything drastic. "I'm going to be called to testify against Malfoy and the others, aren't I?" he said, but didn't need his parents nods to confirm it. He would never act in their defence!

"The Malfoy family lawyer has gotten Lucius off more than once, Harry," James said. "He is good at what he does. They are probably going to try and discredit you, as you are the main witness."

"You don't sound very confident that Malfoy is going to be put away," Harry then said quietly, looking once again to each of them in turn.

"We're not," Lily replied. "No doubt galleons have already changed hands amongst the jury and Death Eater sympathisers on the Wizengamot, to give Malfoy a better chance of getting out of this one."

Harry frowned. "If he does," he said simply, dangerously. "Then I'll drag him off to Azkaban myself. If there's that much corruption in the Ministry then it has come to that, sadly."

James, Lily and Dumbledore were not entirely sure if Harry was jesting or not. The look in his eyes was unreadable, cold and calculating.

"Well..." Dumbledore said, clearing his throat. "No matter what the outcome of the trials you are still going to be put under the scrutiny of the entire Wizengamot, Harry."

Harry sighed. "Wouldn't be the first time..."

"Really?" said James, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "What did you do?"

Shrugging carelessly, Harry answered; "Dementor attack two summers ago. I told them it was self defence. They told me I broke the Statue of Secrecy and underage sorcery laws."

"You were tried in front of the Wizengamot for a simple underage magic breach?" Dumbledore asked, confusion in his voice. *Surely our worlds can't be that different!*

Harry nodded. "I shouldn't have been," he said, scratching his neck. "But the Minister wanted to have me kicked out of Hogwarts and, well, the Wizarding world."

"Who was the Minister?" Lily asked.

"Cornelius Fudge," Harry replied.

"That moron!" James cried. "How did he ever become the Minister of Magic?"

Harry laughed slightly. "There wasn't a day that went by in my fifth year that I didn't ask myself that same question. He was killed a few months ago though, and Arthur Weasley replaced him."

"An excellent choice," Dumbledore said. "Arthur would be a most competent Minister."

Harry smiled. "He was..." he said but then frowned. "He is," he corrected himself. "He and you, sir," Harry continued looking at Dumbledore. "You managed to amass an army of eight hundred Aurors in only a few months."

"Eight hundred..." breathed James. "How many Death Eaters does the Voldemort of your world have?"

"Before I left, he had sent his entire army of about nine hundred into Hogsmeade to battle the Aurors. They were dark wizards from all over the world, who had joined him as foreign Ministries became involved with Britain's war."

"That many people fighting in so small of a space," Lily said quietly. "Hundreds would have died."

Harry sighed with regret. "Hundreds did, but the Aurors won out in the end, after I forced Voldemort to retreat."

A thoughtful silence spread throughout the room and all of the portraits of the previous Headmasters waited patiently for the four of them to continue. Knowing full well what to expect tomorrow, Harry had already decided on his plan of attack. He wouldn't give an inch! No matter what they threw at him he'd answer it as best he could, and as forcefully as possible.

"Your death in our world may also come under examination," Dumbledore continued and Harry looked up to meet his eyes. "Because you did die, you were killed by Voldemort and many witnessed it."

"Too many..." James whispered tearfully, shaking his head in sorrow.

"Well I'll just tell them I've been in hiding these past six years," Harry said carefully, trying not to upset anyone. "The fact that I'm there should be prove enough for that. I don't think any of them would trust or even believe me if I said I was from a different universe."



"Too true..." Lily stated. "Even we didn't trust you at first."

A bell rang throughout the castle that meant the first lessons of the day had just begun. "I better get going," James sighed, standing up and running hand through his hair. "Third years up first this morning."

"I'll see you at lunch, James," Lily said warmly, as James said his goodbyes and then exited the study.

Harry blinked and looked over to the window he had recently jumped out of. "I see you got that window fixed," he said with a small smile, turning back to Dumbledore.

"Indeed," nodded the Headmaster. "A rather unexpected thing you did, Harry, jumping out of it."

"Unexpected and dangerous," Lily said reprovingly.

Harry yawned and covered his mouth. "It worked, didn't it? Can't argue with results."

"Getting back to the matter at hand," Dumbledore said. "Do you feel confident enough to face the Wizengamot tomorrow?"

Harry nodded nonchalantly. "More than confident," he whispered.

"Very well," Dumbledore replied seriously. "James has agreed to take you to the Ministry tomorrow. The trials will take place in the morning, Courtroom Ten."

"That's the room with the comfy chair," smiled Harry.

"Your evaluation will probably take place in the afternoon, in the same room. That is, if the trials are over quickly. If not then you may have to stay the night in London."

"We'll come to support you as well, Harry," Lily said. "Michael, Melissa, and myself. But there is no need to worry," she finished affectionately, nervously.

"I'm not worried," Harry said simply. "All they're trying to do is control me, when they already know that they can't. It is going to be very interesting tomorrow, to say the least."

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It seemed that one night's respite was all Harry was going to get from the nightmares. He awoke early on the morning of Saturday the 8<sup>th</sup> of April, and instantly began to force the images of the dead, of the wounded, and of the demons from his waking mind. Stretching his aching limbs, Harry shook off the numbness in his healing right arm and shoulder.

Something told him that this arm had taken too much of a battering over the last couple of weeks, and may never heal properly. Getting out of bed and heading towards the bathroom, Harry decided to ask his mother or Madam Pomfrey about it later. Today was an important day, and he planned on making an impression that would last.

After showering, the sunlight was just beginning to filter in slowly through the windows, and Harry wrapped a towel around himself as he beheld the clothes he had slept in. Not owning anything beyond the clothes on his back, his new wand and the Nimbus broomstick in this world, Harry had been transfiguring the same clothes over and over again into a clean pair of robes, or a t-shirt and jeans.

He didn't have the money from his parents or Sirius in this world, and he felt uncomfortable to ask for anything, and the situation hadn't arose yet and Harry wasn't about to bring it up. He could survive on his own, had been for years, and the magic for a bit of transfiguration was available to him with a thought.

So he transformed the jeans and t-shirt into a pair of formal trousers, black for the occasion, and a short-sleeved black shirt with a pocket on the left side. Stepping into his 'new' clothes, Harry knew this would be considered quite formal in the Muggle world, and he didn't want to conform to Wizarding standards of dress for these hearings. It would look like he was trying to obey a set standard of the Wizarding world, and that could be taken as a wish or attempt to be controlled. With these Muggle clothes he still appeared smart, but not wizard-smart.

Not even bothering to straighten his wild hair in the mirror, Harry did decide to remove the griffin earring that had hung in his ear for just over six months. He reached behind his left ear to grasp the clasp and pulled. For one strange moment he felt a pull of resistance, and found it odd. But a moment later he guessed he must have imagined it, as the earring came out effortlessly.

Putting the golden griffin safely in his pocket, Harry ran a hand through his towel-dry hair and replaced his glasses. Not giving another glance to the mirror, he exited the bathroom and walked down the stairs towards the common room. It was still too early on a Saturday for anyone else to be up, and once again he found himself sitting alone in his chosen chair by the dead fire.

Harry thought about the coming day for an hour before deciding to go down to breakfast a little earlier than anyone else. If he walked slowly, there would probably be a few people in the Hall when he arrived.

The castle was getting warmer a lot earlier nowadays, as spring began to meld into summer, which was still a few months away. But it seemed the heat was coming early this year, and Harry was glad he hadn't decided on robes for today, as it was already warm now and would probably be uncomfortable later on.

There were a few early risers in the Great Hall as Harry took his seat at the Gryffindor table. Although he was the only Gryffindor up so far he didn't mind sitting on his own, it was actually quite peaceful. The house elves had, of course, provided breakfast as usual, and Harry began to butter some toast as more and more people began to arrive.

The early hours of that morning past by relatively quickly for Harry, who was eager to get the day done with. Soon enough Ron and Hermione had arrived and he struck up another conversation with them, as a cacophony of other voices brought Hogwarts to life. The staff were all present up at the staff table and Harry gave Dumbledore and his father the slightest of nods, before the post owls descended upon the Hall.

A *Prophet* bird landed neatly in front of Hermione, who was sitting opposite Harry. She deposited a few knuts in its pouch and the tawny owl took flight again. Draining his goblet of pumpkin juice, Harry

noticed Hermione quickly glance at him as she read the front page of the newspaper.

"Good news?" Harry asked sardonically, tapping his fingers on the hard polished wood of the table.

Hermione shook her head quickly. "Afraid not," she replied and passed him the paper. "Rita Skeeter must really have it in for you!"

Harry laughed at the truth in that statement and his eyes fell to the *Prophet*.

## ***HARRY POTTER: ANOTHER TWIST IN THE TALE***

*Special Correspondent Rita Skeeter*

*Many now know the details of You Know Who's attack on the peaceful school of Hogwarts only four days ago. Many have heard the rumours and wild speculation concerning the apparent retreat of He Who Must Not*

*Be Named, our world's strongest and most feared enemy.*

*Harry Potter rocketed into fame overnight, as the only wizard to have ever come close to ending this war once and for all, a claim that even the great Albus Dumbledore cannot boast. But did Potter really duel and best You Know Who? How did a sixteen year old school boy, who has spent the last six years in hiding, outlast the Dark Lord who has more than fifty years experience over Potter.*

*Was it all just a perfectly orchestrated game between You Know Who and his servant, Harry Potter. Did we really witness the temporary defeat of our enemy, or were we lured into a false sense of hope, of need for the 'heroics' of Potter, to soften our resolve and make us weaker when the Dark Lord strikes back with his full force and wrath.*

*All we can do is hope that this is not the case, even if all the facts point towards this devastating goal. Potter will be evaluated by the judicial arm of the Wizengamot this afternoon, and Minister Crouch himself will administer the questioning and be the overall judge of his character.*

*The Wizengamot will also host....*

Harry clicked his teeth and slid the paper back across the table to Hermione. "You know, you'd have to be really stupid to believe that," he said, looking up at the enchanted ceiling. "But I know that hundreds of people will." He could already sense the glares of mistrust from those in the Hall who had copies of the *Prophet*.

"No one who saw your duel could question your motives, Harry," Hermione said honestly. "Rita Skeeter has always written the worst about people."

"Ain't that the truth!" Harry chortled, cracking his knuckles.

Hermione laughed slightly as well. "I see you're not wearing robes to these trials," she stated, looking at his smart shirt. "The Wizengamot may disapprove of that."

"That," smiled Harry, "is what I was going for."

A hand came down on Harry's good left shoulder and he turned to see James Potter standing behind him. "We better be making a move, Harry," he said.

Harry nodded and stood up. "I'll see you later," he then said to Hermione. "Good luck with Quidditch, Ron. Get that cup!"

Ron gave him a lopsided smile. "It's as good as ours."

"That's what I like to hear," James said as he and Harry began to move away towards the Entrance Hall.

"Do you ever get the feeling you're being watched?" Harry asked calmly as he exited the Hall with a thousand pairs of eyes upon him.

James inwardly smiled. "How do you want to do this then?" he asked. "The trials start at ten o'clock, you have to be seated by then. We could floo or take the Knight B-"

"I can Apparate," Harry cut in quickly. "Straight to that annoying telephone box that descends into the Ministry."

James shook his head slowly. "Why doesn't that surprise me!? All right then, we'll have to walk to the gates."

It was warm outside and the grounds were deserted. Everyone was still enjoying their breakfast in the Great Hall, or eagerly awaiting the Quidditch match in an hour. Harry and James walked in a comfortable silence for the most part, but occasionally they did talk.

"Dumbledore is going to be on this committee overseeing you, Harry," James said as they passed by a particularly burnt part of the grounds. "You'll have allies on the bench."

"So will the Death Eaters," Harry sighed as they approached the gates.

The two of them stepped over the ward line and Harry did feel the familiar tingle of the awesome power behind the web of wards, although he now knew they had a fundamental flaw. "Right," James said. "You know where you're going?"

Harry nodded, and then with a thought, disappeared with a pop and reappeared almost instantly in the noisy, concrete city of London. He looked around quickly, and raised his palm in defence just in case. The street was deserted though, and Harry spied the familiar old red telephone box that was the visitor's entrance to the Ministry.

James appeared with a pop next to him and together they entered the dilapidated box, next to a heavily graffitied wall. It was a tight fit for the both of them and Harry recalled having to squeeze himself and his five closest friends into this box back at the end of his fifth year. *That had been a terrible night!*

Harry was closest to the receiver on the telephone apparatus, which still looked as though it should be out of order, so he picked up the receiver and-

"What's the number?" he asked.

"Seven, two, four, four, six, two," James told him, trying to edge away from the telephone so Harry could enter the digits.

Harry entered the number and as the dial whirred smoothly back into place, the cool female voice sounded inside the telephone box. "Welcome to the Ministry of Magic. Please state your name and business."

"Harry Potter," Harry replied quickly. "Here to make sure some Death Eaters end up in Azkaban and because the Wizengamot is jerking me around."

"James Potter," James said soon after. "Here to escort Harry Potter to the Death Eater trials."

"Thank you," the cool female voice said. "Visitor, please take the badge and attach it to the front of your robes."

As usual, there was a click and a rattle and Harry picked up the two badges from the metal chute in the box, where the coins usually appeared. The square silver badge read *Harry Potter, Wizengamot Trials*. Pinning the badge to the front of his shirt, the female voice spoke again.

"Visitor to the Ministry, you are required to submit to a search and present your wand for registration at the security desk, which is located at the far end of the Atrium."

Harry stumbled as the floor of the telephone box shuddered quickly and they began to descend into the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic. It took a full minute as they sank into the earth, and the pale golden light hit him in the face before anything else.

"The Ministry of Magic wishes you a pleasant day," said the woman's voice.

Harry and James stepped out of the red telephone box as the door sprang open. The first thing Harry noticed, before the flash of a hundred cameras. Was the row of Aurors in white robes that formed a long line between the telephone box and the twenty or so lifts along the back wall of the massive Atrium Hall.

They were keeping the way clear for him, and other Ministry officials, as the reporters and other personnel that were crowded along the length of the Ministry pushed forward to get closer to him.

Harry shielded his eyes against the flash of hundreds of cameras and he and James walked quickly along the length of the Atrium as a deafening shouting match emerged in the large room.

"POTTER!"

"MR. POTTER"

"HARRY!"

"HOW DO-"

"WHEN!"

"PO-ER"

"POT-"

"HAR-"

The twenty five Aurors on either side of Harry and James kept the crowd from surging forward, and for this Harry was very grateful. The voices only got louder as they walked along the highly polished, dark wood floor and the flashes from the cameras were set to blind him.

Some of the Aurors he passed smiled and nodded respectively to him, and Harry returned these nods. He realised that they were probably at Hogwarts the other day, and saw him duel with Voldemort. They didn't believe Rita Skeeter or the *Prophet*. He had earned their respect the one and only way a true battle hardened Auror could give it, on the battlefield.



"A FEW QUESTIONS, MR. POTTER!" cried a particularly loud voice over the sound of the others, but Harry wasn't in the mood.

A few of the Aurors also acknowledged James, and James himself shook the hands of a dozen of them. He had worked with most of these men years ago, before taking up the position of Defence Against the Dark Arts professor at Hogwarts. He and Sirius had been amongst the elite of the Aurors, and it was their influence, as well as Dumbledore's, that helped secure the position of Head of Department for Remus.

Urged on by the Aurors, who were getting frustrated with the crowd of reporters and had begun to silence those who had cast *Sonorus* charms on themselves, James and Harry walked through a pair of gates and into the smaller, reporter-free hall beyond, where the twenty or so lifts stood behind wrought golden grilles.

Harry was glad they had left the crowds behind, but he had the strangest feeling that he was being watched. *Of course I'm being watched* he thought. But he felt that it was a pair of unfriendly eyes but then dismissed that as well. *There are probably a lot of unfriendly eyes in that crowd.* Still though, as he walked towards the lifts, Harry couldn't shake the feeling that he had seen something out of the corner of his eye that meant trouble.

"Didn't think we were going to make it then," James said, slapping Harry on the back. "How's your arm doing, by the way?" he asked as a lift descended with a great clattering sound.

Harry shrugged and rubbed the white bandage across the length of his arm and up to his shoulder. "It's getting there," he answered as the golden grille of the lift slid back and the two of them entered it. "What time is it?"

"Quarter to ten," James said, and hit the number nine button. "We're going to be fine."

The lift descended quickly and the cool female voice of the Ministry automated response machine said, "Department of Mysteries."

"Oh how I hate this floor," Harry whispered as the grille slid back again and he and James began to walk along the bare corridor that was, again, too familiar for Harry. They passed by some more Aurors and also a group of wizards in blue and green robes. They all stopped to stare at Harry as he walked by and Harry stared stubbornly back. From the look on a few of their faces he knew they were trying to intimidate him.

James led Harry down the corridor and then turned left, away from the door that led to the rooms, which in turn, Harry knew, led to the Veil. He shuddered as he and James stepped down a flight of stairs, heading towards Courtroom Ten.

They reached the bottom of the steps and this corridor was busy with many witches and wizards, some talking amongst themselves, others talking to the few *Daily Prophet* reporters that had been allowed to witness the trials today. Harry gritted his teeth as he spotted Rita Skeeter and sighed as she spotted him.

"Mr. Potter," she smiled sickeningly, and the four dozen or so witches and wizards in the corridor fell silent.

Harry frowned and glanced at her carelessly, before not giving her another thought and moving on towards the large wooden doors with the heavy iron bolts and locks that was Courtroom Ten. James put a hand on his shoulder and steered him in quickly, as he heard the jangle of Rita Skeeter behind them, her extravagant jewellery bangles and rings clattering loudly.

As he had expected, the large dungeon they entered was all too familiar. The walls of dark stone were dimly lit by fluttering torches. Benches rose up on either side of Harry and James that were slowly being filled with witches and wizards, a few dozen important Ministry personnel, and of course, seated up on the highest benches were the Wizengamot.

All talk had ceased when he had entered, everyone recognising him from the dozens of pictures that had been taken of him over the past couple of days. Biting back the feeling of anticipation and nerves, Harry looked to James as to what to do.

"Mr. Potter, Harry Potter," a familiar voice called out to him and Harry turned to see Arthur Weasley striding across the length of the large courtroom to meet him.

"Ah, Arthur," James said as he drew level to them, shaking his hand. "I was wondering where you got to."

"Last minute preparations, James," Arthur said gravely. "This must be Harry!"

Harry shook Mr. Weasley's hand as well, although it felt strange to be meeting him again for the first time. "Arthur is the Ministry's prosecution wizard for the trials of Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle," James whispered in his ear.

"You're going to be the main witness, Harry," Arthur said, leading them over to a small table that had four seats, positioned to the left of the three chairs in the middle of the room that were covered in chains.

Harry saw that Remus Lupin was seated at one of the normal wooden chairs at the small table, and James sat down next to him, as Arthur explained the situation to Harry.

"This shouldn't take long, Harry," Arthur said as they both sat down at the wooden table. Harry next to James and Arthur next to Harry. "Of course it may be difficult because of certain... *corruptions*... in the Wizengamot," he whispered this part as dozens of eyes were still upon Harry.

The courtroom was filling up slowly around them but Harry had to keep his voice low, as sound echoed well in this room. "How's it gonna happen?" he asked.

"Myself and the defence lawyer, a man named Howland Brand, are going to state our cases first to the Wizengamot, and then you and Remus will be called to give evidence. You will be examined the most harshly I'm afraid, as you apprehended the accused."

"What are they likely to ask?" Harry said apprehensively.

Mr. Weasley's face darkened. "Due to the...err... unusual circumstances surrounding you, Harry. They're going to use the Imperius defence as well as your character against you. Brand will want to discredit you and he is very clever and good at what he does."

"Defending the guilty," Harry spat. "Why didn't you tell me any of this earlier in the week?" he then asked Arthur.

Arthur sighed. "I was only appointed to prosecution a few hours ago," he whispered. "Those in the Wizengamot who have the most influence and are in Lucius Malfoy's pocket, made sure to delay the selection as long as possible, to weaken the prosecution."

Harry nodded with understanding, but it still made him angry. He looked up to the fifty or so members of the Wizengamot seated on the highest benches. All of them were wearing purple robes with the elaborate 'W' on the left hand-side of the chest, and all of them were staring at him. Most with a deep curiosity, but some of the others were practically glaring daggers at him.

The room was almost full now and Harry watched as a rather tall man stood and called for order as the clock in the dungeon struck ten. Harry stared at this man and took a deep breath, it was Bartemius Crouch, the Minister of Magic and dead man in his world.

"Quiet please," Crouch called, his manner just as Harry remembered it. He was strict and straight to a point. The two hundred or so present in the dungeon all fell silent, and Crouch continued. "Bring in the accused."

Harry turned around as he heard the echoing footsteps of half a dozen people entering the room. Lucius Malfoy walked in with his head held high, behind him were Crabbe and Goyle and on either side of them were three Aurors. All three of the Death Eaters had their hands bound, and as they were seated in the chained chairs, two of the chains snapped their legs into place.

Harry met Malfoy's gaze and saw the hate for him there, he returned it just as fiercely. "Death Eater trials of the eighth of April," Crouch said in his loud, dominating voice. No one else spoke. "Pertaining to

offences committed under the Decree's seven through nine of Dark Sorcery and the illegality of possessing the Dark Mark. Also taken under consideration is the use of the unforgivable Imperius curse on the accused, Lucius Malfoy, Vincent Crabbe Senior, and Gregory Goyle Senior."

Harry ignored all of the glances he was receiving from the hundreds in the room, and concentrated on what Crouch was saying. He didn't want to miss anything important.

"Judgement to be carried out by: Bartemius Crouch Senior, Minister for Magic; Amelia Susan Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement; and Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The jury consists of the remaining forty seven members of the Wizengamot. Court scribe, Alicia Spinnet."

Harry raised an eyebrow as he saw Alicia, whom he had played Quidditch with on the Gryffindor house team, poised over a parchment with a quill scratching furiously across the page in front of her. He also breathed a brief sigh of momentary relief after hearing that Dumbledore was one of the judges, but Harry could already see that the outcome of this trial would depend on whether or not he could provide enough evidence to convict the three Death Eaters, showing without a doubt that they were guilty. If he could do that, then the members of the jury, the Wizengamot, who had been bribed or were Death Eaters, couldn't let Malfoy and the others go without exposing themselves.

It would be close and risky, but Harry knew the *truth*, although he was not innocent and naïve enough anymore to believe that that mattered at all in this world.

"Prosecution?" Crouch then called.

"Arthur Weasley," Mr. Weasley said, standing up to address the court and Wizengamot. "Prosecution against the accused and employee of the Magical Law Enforcement division, under Amelia Bones. Two witnesses, Remus John Lupin, Head of the Auror division, and Harry James Potter, currently attending Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

"Defence?" barked Crouch.

"Howland Brand," a short pale man said, standing up from the table to the right of the three chairs holding Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle in place. "Defence for the accused and employee of the Magical Law Enforcement division, under Amelia Bones. Defence consists of Mr Lucius Malfoy's testimony, the Imperius defence and the cross-examining of Remus John Lupin and Harry James Potter."

"Very well," Crouch growled, showing no emotion. Harry recalled seeing him in Dumbledore's pensieve two years ago - he was ruthless in these trials. "The charges are as follows: Possessing the Dark Mark, a green skull branded into the left forearm of those in the service of He Who Must Not Be Named. Participating, whether under Imperius or not remains to be seen, in an attack on Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry on the morning of April 4<sup>th</sup>, and of using the Unforgivable curses, Avada Kedavra and Cruciatus."

"You three are Lucius Malfoy, Vincent Crabbe, and Gregory Goyle?" Crouch asked, as a formality.

"Yes," the three bound Death Eaters replied.

"Very well. Mr. Brand, please present your case to the Wizengamot."

"Thank you, Minister," Brand said, standing up and walking around the table to the front of the dungeon, looking up at the Wizengamot next to the solitary witness stand that was positioned on an angle to behold both the Wizengamot on the high benches and the defendants.

"Wizards and Witches of the Wizengamot," Brand began. "Today we are here to find the innocence of Lucius Malfoy, Vincent Crabbe, and Gregory Goyle. Three men, pillars of the Wizarding community, who have given to countless charities throughout their lives, who were placed under one of the unforgivable curses, the Imperius curse." He paused for effect here and Harry saw him quickly glance at him.

"There is no need to go into details of this particular curse, as the effects are well known. The defendants are members of three of the strongest Wizarding families in our world, making them priority targets for the agents of the Dark Lord, as they possess a large combined

wealth and influence in this Ministry. Sadly, these peaceful men were subjected to the Imperius curse, and then brutally assaulted by Harry James Potter during their apprehension on the morning of the 4<sup>th</sup> of April."

Brand smiled sickeningly at Harry and ran a hand through his straw like hair. Harry scowled and almost stood up at that point but felt his father's arm holding him down tightly. He also noticed the slightest shake of his head.

"Despite the display of force shown by Mr. Potter during their capture, my three clients would also like to thank him for ending their torture under the Imperius curse," Brand then said and muttered whisperings broke out throughout the dungeon again.

Harry saw at least a dozen reporters around the room, all of them whispering into Quick Quotes Quills whilst keeping their eyes on the trial. He returned his gaze to Brand, who was preparing to speak again.

"Thankfully, no crimes to severe have ever been committed by these three honourable men whilst they were in the service, against their true will, of You Know Who. Having only been put under the curse three weeks ago at a small gathering of friends at the Malfoy estate, all three are fully prepared to face any charges the Wizengamot may place upon them, for their actions, even though they were not in control. We trust in the wisdom of the Wizengamot however, to deliver the correct and proper judgement. Thank you."

With a small smile playing at the corners of his lips that only Harry, Remus, James, and Arthur could notice, brand walked back to his chair at the defence table and sat down smugly.

"Thank you, Mr. Brand," Minister Crouch said sincerely. "Mr. Weasley, please present the prosecution's views."

Clearing his throat, Arthur Weasley stood and walked around the table, past Malfoy and the others and over to the floor near the witness stand. "Good morning," he said, nodding to a few friends in the crowd. He sounded extremely confident, although Harry noticed the shake of his hand. "Wizards and Witches of the Wizengamot,"

Arthur began. "Today we are here to exact justice upon those guilty of serving He Who Must Not Be Named in this ceaseless war we have been fighting for far too long."

Just like Brand, Mr. Weasley paused dramatically for effect at this point and Harry could tell from the nods around the room that many agreed with him.

"I will put to you today, through reason, common sense and the eye-witness accounts of Harry James Potter and Remus John Lupin, that Lucius Malfoy, Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle were not under the Imperius curse and have long been in the service of You Know Who, of their own free will, however misguided and prejudiced that will might be."

Harry had to hand it to him then. He did just have a certain way with words.

"These three men, these three Death Eaters," Arthur continued. "Are not only in the service of You Know Who, they rank amongst the highest of all his servants. If, as Mr. Brand says, they were only recently placed under the Imperius, how is it they rose to become members of the inner circle? Surely a more loyal, un-cursed Death Eater would have been a better choice. If there is one thing we know about He Who Must Not Be Named, it is that he is no fool. Never would he, or anyone, put someone under Imperius in a position of power such as this one."

Again, another pause for effect and Harry saw Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle fidgeting in their seats, although they remained quiet and a quick glance from Brand made them stay still.

"Unless," Arthur continued, "they were never under the Imperius curse, and Mr. Potter's apprehension of *fifteen* Death Eaters does not need to be scrutinised as excessive force, as he battled for his life against a vastly superior numbered force. We trust, that is the free people of this country trust, that the Wizengamot will not be blinded by falsities and attempts by Mr. Brand to distract their attention onto Mr. Potter, and make the correct judgement when the time comes. Thank you."



Arthur Weasley cleared his throat again and then turned to come and sit back down. Crouch stood as he did and addressed the court in his booming voice. "Thank you, Mr. Weasley," he said. "If the prosecution would like to present its first witness, we can proceed efficiently and effectively. I would also like to request that the members of the press and Ministry personnel keep their opinions to themselves, and cease whispering."

The courtroom dungeon fell silent as Arthur stood again and said; "The prosecution would ask Remus John Lupin to take the stand."

Harry watched, as did two hundred others, as Remus stood up and walked over to the podium positioned near the front of the room, the witness stand, and stepped up the two steps and onto the wooden stand.

"You are Remus John Lupin, Head of the Auror Division and Ministry employee?" Crouch asked.

"I am," Remus said steadily.

"You may proceed, Mr. Weasley."

"Thank you, Minister," Arthur said and walked back out around to the front of the room. "Mr. Lupin," he said. "You were the one who delivered the captured inner circle to the Ministry holding cells, were you not?"

"I was," Lupin said.

"Were Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, the three accused, amongst those fifteen?" Arthur asked.

Remus nodded quickly and looked at Arthur and only Arthur. "They were," he answered. "Robed as Death Eaters."

"Were there any signs of the Imperius curse upon these three, once they had been revived after Mr. Potter had rendered them unconscious?" Mr. Weasley asked, glancing quickly at Lucius Malfoy.

"Objection," Brand said suddenly and stood. "There are no visible signs that a person is acting under the influence of Imperius. This line of questioning is pointless."

"Mr. Weasley," Crouch said. "Move on from here."

Arthur nodded. "What I mean is," he said slowly. "Did they immediately claim to be under Imperius once Ministry interrogation had begun, or did they display any signs of the insanity that is sometimes attributed to spending too long of a time under this curse. Did you believe them when they said they had been placed under imperius?"

Remus shook his head slowly and then addressed Mr. Weasley. "As soon as they were revived and interrogated, separately I might add, Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle immediately claimed they had been under Imperius for a period of about one month. It seemed strange that they had all snapped out of the curse so quickly after capture... my personal opinion is that they were lying. I did not believe them, and they were returned to Ministry confinement until this trial."

"Thank you, Mr. Lupin," Arthur then said. "Mr. Brand, your witness."

Howland Brand remained seated for a few moments until Mr. Weasley had sat down, and then he took a sip of water from the glass in front of him, and examined a piece of parchment. Eventually he stood and walked quickly out around the table. When he spoke, he did so quickly and curtly.

"Mr. Lupin," he said fiercely. "You are a werewolf, are you not?"

"OBJECTION!" roared Mr. Weasley, standing up so fast he knocked over his chair backwards. "That has nothing to do with this trial, and only serves to discredit Mr. Lupin."

"Mr. Brand," Crouch said strictly. "Do not go there."

It was too late though, Harry saw, the damage had been done. Most members of the Wizengamot were too narrow-minded and saw Remus as a threat, a dark creature. They would disregard his opinion, even if it was truth.

"No more questions," Brand then said, smiling sickeningly as he returned to his seat.

Harry was surprised to hear Arthur swearing under his breath as Crouch dismissed Remus and he sat back down, looking slightly shaken. "It's going to be all on you now, Harry," Mr. Weasley whispered angrily and Harry nodded.

"Would Mr. Malfoy, Crabbe or Goyle like to say anything in their defence?" Crouch then asked as the Wizengamot whispered amongst themselves.

Brand turned to look at his defendants and Harry did as well. He saw them shake their heads in the negative. "No, Minister," Brand said. "My clients trust in the wisdom of the Wizengamot, and of the knowledge known of their characters. They hope that the truth in their story will be seen though, and that they will not be sentenced for being nothing more than innocent men."

"Very well," Crouch sighed. Harry could tell he was trying to remain impartial, but it was obvious he thought Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle were guilty. But he didn't have any power beyond that which the verdict of the remainder of the Wizengamot gave him. "Mr. Weasley, your next witness..."

"Indeed," Arthur said quickly and stood up once again, sipping from his glass of water. "The prosecution would ask Harry James Potter to take the stand."

Swallowing his nerves, Harry stood and walked around the table as silence spread like a wave across all in the dungeon. It was so quiet you could hear a pin drop, and the only sound was that of the quills scratching across the parchment of the reporters.

Harry walked up and into the witness stand, staring up to Minister Crouch on the top bench, along with Dumbledore and Amelia Bones. "You are Harry James Potter?" Crouch asked, staring at him curiously from behind his spectacles.

Harry cleared his throat and rested his arms on the wooden stand. "I am," he said deeply.

"Proceed, Mr. Weasley."

"Thank you, Minister," Arthur said and then turned to Harry, smiling encouragingly. "Harry," he began. "Is it true that, after an attempt on your life six years ago, you went into hiding to train yourself to fight against He Who Must Not Be Named and his armies?"

Harry nodded and spoke without a hint of a lie in his voice. "It is."

Arthur nodded. "A most admirable goal," he said calmly, removing his glasses and using the sleeve of his robe to clean them thoughtfully and thoroughly. "You were the only one in a position to see the defendants before their capture by Ministry forces, is that true?"

"It is," Harry said quickly, glancing at Malfoy and then Brand.

"Do you know of the effects and behaviour of a person under the effects of the Imperius curse?" Arthur asked, turning to face the entire procession as he did. "And would you say that any of the Death Eaters you stunned that day were under it?"

"I know the effects very well," Harry said, thinking of the times he had been under it and the madness and strange behaviour exhibited by those who couldn't fight it like he could. "And there is no doubt in my mind that those three," he said strongly, pointing to Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle in turn, "were never under the Imperius, and that they were in complete control of their actions on the 4<sup>th</sup>."

"Please could you tell the Wizengamot what occurred that morning between yourself and the defendants," Arthur waved his hand towards the high benches, acknowledging the Wizengamot.

Harry nodded and took a deep breath. "They flew in through the Great Hall," he said. "Smashed a window and came in on their brooms. Fifteen Death Eaters, Voldemort's inner circle-"

Harry was drowned out instantly as dozens of witches and even some wizards, screamed shrilly and paled at the mention of the Dark Lord's name. He looked over to his father and saw him shaking his head regretfully, whilst Crouch tried to regain order in the dungeon.

Eventually, after a few moments the dungeon quieted down and Crouch ceased his shouts for order. "Mr. Potter," he then said angrily. "Please refrain from using that- that name. If any must be given, refer to *him* as You Know Who or He Who Must Not Be Named." Crouch sat back down as if that settled it but Harry was shaking his head.

"No," he replied simply, and for a moment no one spoke, as if not quite knowing what to do.

Crouch looked confused and then he stood again, clearing his throat importantly. "Continue, Mr. Weasley."

Arthur looked nervously between Harry and the Wizengamot, as if not sure what to expect if he continued questioning this strange and powerful boy he had called to the stand. "Err... please continue, Harry," he said somewhat lamely.

Harry nodded. "As I was saying," he said. "The inner circle had just dropped in and I was in the Entrance Hall at the time. I heard them, so I ran into the Great Hall, not entirely sure what to expect. As soon as I entered the Hall the doors snapped closed and a ward was placed upon them. A time delay ward that would keep them locked. I didn't know the incantation...."

"Okay," Arthur said. "Continue..."

"I could have broken the ward and escaped," Harry continued. "But when I saw them, all of them, I felt confident enough in my abilities that I could disable the fifteen of them. I didn't want them free to roam in the castle, as Hogwarts is home to many Muggleborn students, and we all know the agenda of Voldemort and his Death Eaters."

Another session of screams and this time Crouch looked furious. "Mr. Potter," he whispered dangerously. "Continue... very carefully."

Harry paused for a moment and seemed to appraise Crouch before continuing. "Right..." he said. "I cast a summoning charm on the fifteen masked Death Eaters and removed all their masks. Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle were amongst them and I believe the others were all Death Eaters known to the Ministry, and are in Azkaban now."

"That is correct," Amelia Bones answered. "Only these three claimed innocence."

Harry nodded. "None of the Death Eaters in the Great Hall that day were under Imperius. None of them," he said gravely. "Lucius Malfoy was leading the pack, he wasn't being controlled by any of them, neither were Crabbe and Goyle. He said it was his job to take me back to his Master, because I was supposed to be dead."

"And then what happened?" Arthur asked.

"Well I refused," Harry chortled. "He didn't seem to understand that though, and wands were drawn. A few of them - I think it might have been Bellatrix Lestrange and Rookwood - they cast the cruciatus curse at me but I dodged it. This angered Malfoy as I was supposed to be brought in unharmed. He ordered them to cast stunners at me, at the same time."

"You dodged fifteen stunning spells?" Arthur said, unable to keep the disbelief out of his own voice.

Harry shook his head. "No," he answered. "I cast a reflective shield charm, along with an absorption spell, heat seeking charm, and a multiplier spell. All fifteen stunners hit my modified shield and were absorbed into it, and then returned upon the Death Eaters three fold, as forty five stunners."

"Objection," Howland Brand said, jumping up from his chair. "The magic required for forty five stunning spells would be beyond that of a sixteen year old wizard. In fact it would be beyond any wizard on this earth. The witness is lying."

"Ministry spellworkers," Dumbledore began, speaking for the first time from up on the high bench. "Mapped the magic used in the Hall that morning. At approximately eleven thirty that morning, sixty identical spells were fired over the course of one minute. All of them were the Stunning spell and forty five of them came from a single source. Mr. Potter did manage this amazing magic."

Brand opened his mouth to speak but then thought better of it, and sat down quickly. Although Harry noticed that the quick quotes quills

were now scribbling so fast that it was almost a blur. Mr. Weasley motioned for him to continue.

"All but one of the Death Eaters were stunned by my stunners," Harry said. "Bellatrix Lestrange managed to dodge those that latched onto her, but I fired another and she was out cold."

"You say Lucius Malfoy was leading the Death Eaters to capture you and deliver you to You Know Who?" asked Mr. Weasley.

"Yes," Harry agreed.

"What was Mr. Malfoy's manner whilst speaking to you?" Arthur asked.

"I could tell that he wasn't acting under Imperius," Harry said. "I would have known that anyway, as there is an unspoken fear in Hogwarts caused by his son, Draco Malfoy. He has made it quite clear that anyone who annoys him will suffer, he will tell his father... and while no one has ever voiced it, it is implied he has been a Death Eater for many years."

"You are quite sure that Mr. Malfoy was not acting under Imperius?"

Harry nodded. "Absolutely positive. He was too... *awake*, if you understand me. He was too aware of what he was doing, he was following orders, but of his own free will."

Mr. Weasley smiled slightly. "And do you find it odd, that Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle managed to break the out of the trance of the Imperius curse as soon as they were captured?"

Harry laughed harshly, quietly. "I don't find it odd," he said slowly. "I find it convenient."

"Thank you, Mr. Potter," Arthur said. "Your witness, Mr. Brand."

Harry tapped his fingers defiantly on the wood of the witness stand as Brand made an attempt to unnerve him by once again taking his time to stand up. Displaying his impatience though, Harry sighed and it

echoed magnificently throughout the dungeon. Brand stood up quickly and walked around his table and over to Harry.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Potter," he said and Harry glanced quickly at the large clock on the far wall. It had just gone twelve, they had been in here two hours! It hadn't felt that long to him.

"Good afternoon," Harry replied emotionlessly.

"A rather interesting tale you have just woven for us," he said lightly, pacing up and down in front of the stand.

"It was the truth," Harry said dangerously.

"That remains to be seen," Brand replied calmly, smiling smugly again. It was as smile that didn't, and probably never, reached his eyes. "You said you knew the effects of the Imperius curse very well, could you please tell us where you gathered this information?"

Harry nodded. "I've read about it in several books and-"

"AH!" Brand said quickly, smiling with a premature victory. "And you believe that this makes you an expert on one of the most unforgivable of curses. One cannot discern this knowledge from books alone."

"Let me finish," Harry said quietly, and all in the room fell silent. "I have read about it several books, as I needed to know what I was up against. But apart from that I've been around enough people under the curse to notice the subtle changes it wrought in them, and finally I've had it cast upon me at least half a dozen times."

"You have been placed under the Imperius curse, Mr. Potter?" Brand asked. "What were you told to do?"

Harry shook his head. "Nothing, I can fight it and shake it off in a matter of seconds."

Brand waved his hand dismissively. "Impossible," he said testily.

Harry sighed with frustration. "Ask any of the Aurors that saw my duel with Voldemort the other day," he said, and then paused to give



everyone a moment to get over it. "He threw the Imperius at me and I shook it off just as quickly. There were many witnesses, including Remus Lupin, my father James Potter and Albus Dumbledore."

Brand's cheeks flushed red with anger but he managed to control himself. "Be that as it may, it still does not mean that you can identify the application of the Imperius curse upon anyone. And that includes Mr. Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle, who were indeed under this particular curse."

"Okay," Harry said gravely. "Then let's ask them that whilst they are under Veritaserum."

Silence for a moment. "Veritaserum cannot be used in court," Brand said quickly, quietly.

"Why not?" Harry asked angrily, staring from Brand and then up into the sea of faces staring down at him. "It would dispense with the need for this trial and find those three guilty."

"Do not think you can renegotiate the law for use in your own interests, Potter," Brand said quickly, his face turning an even deeper red that Harry thought was not very flattering.

"I wouldn't presume to!" Harry shouted, as loud mutterings broke out between all those present. "I'm simply saying that this could be over now with a few drops of potion!"

"LISTEN, MR. POTTER-" Brand began but was cut off as another voice drowned them all out.

"ENOUGH!" Crouch bellowed. "Veritaserum cannot be lawfully used in court because the effects can differ from wizard to wizard, and their reactions could be compromised."

"Or they might end up doing something stupid like telling the truth," Harry said fiercely, glaring at Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle.

"Mr. Potter," Crouch continued furiously. "One more outburst like that and you will be removed from the court and your testimony disregarded!"

Harry threw his hand up in frustration. "I've had enough of this..." he whispered and ran a hand through his unruly hair.

Brand decided to cut his losses there, and without saying another word returned to his seat furiously. Crouch dismissed Harry and he returned to his own seat, glaring around the room as he did.

"Now," declared Crouch. "Do you have anymore witnesses at all, Mr. Weasley?" he asked.

"No," Arthur replied.

"Mr. Brand," Crouch turned to him. "Is there anything you or your defendants would like to say?"

Brand turned to Malfoy, who shook his head slightly. "We have nothing to add," Brand said coldly.

"Very well," Crouch nodded as if relieved. "Wizengamot," he then said. "You have heard testimony from both Remus John Lupin and Harry James Potter; you have judged and regarded their character, as well as that of the defendants."

Harry regarded the entire Wizengamot as a whole, seated on the highest benches in the room. He knew it had now come down to how many had been bribed, how many were Death Eaters, and how many sympathised with their cause. He felt that there was a fairly good chance that more than half belonged to one or more of those groups.

"All those in favour of clearing the accused of all charges?" Crouch said.

Harry watched with a sinking feeling in his stomach as, the forty seven members of the jury, of the Wizengamot, raised their hands to clear the three Death Eaters. It wasn't a majority vote, but Crouch counted them quickly. "And all those that find the defendants guilty of the crime of being willing Death Eaters?"

Twenty one unwavering hands rose to convict the sadistic killers seated chained to the magical chairs in the middle of the dungeon. But that was not enough. Twenty six had voted to clear them.

*They had been cleared.*

Harry saw Crouch take a deep, shuddering breath, and then looking from Amelia Bones to Dumbledore, he saw the anger on their faces, but he couldn't undermine the vote of the Wizengamot. To do so would mean losing his position as Minister, and these Death Eaters would still walk free. "Very well," he whispered. "Lucius Malfoy, Vincent Crabbe, and Gregory Goyle, you have been cleared of all charges and are - are free to go."

Instantly the chains holding the three men in place slackened and they stood up smugly as many of the wizards and witches in the crowd applauded the Wizengamot's decision. Arthur Weasley sighed in defeat and James punched the table before him hard. But Harry was absolutely furious.

*They're applauding these killers!* he thought in disbelief. He was not going to stand for it.

Harry stood up angrily and powerfully as Brand smiled victoriously, shaking Lucius Malfoy's hand. "GOD!" he shouted and everyone in the dungeon abruptly fell silent. "This Wizengamot is as corrupt as it is useless!"

It took a moment, but then suddenly many gasps of shock, outrage and denial swept throughout the courtroom. Suddenly the silence was broken and Harry came under a verbal attack from almost everyone in the room, save the decent members of the Wizengamot and a few others.

"MR. POTTER!" Crouch bellowed, magically amplifying his voice. "I HOPE I DON'T NEED TO REMIND YOU THAT THIS WIZENGAMOT WILL BE EVALUATING YOU IN FIFTEEN MINUTES, AND THAT YOU WOULD DO WELL TO KEEP SUCH COMMENTS TO YOURSELF."

Harry scowled and then not wasting another minute, turned and stormed out of the room on his heel, anger and fury exuding off of him in the form of pure magic, making it appear that his skin had a particularly glossy sheen and small bolts of power erupted from his hand, disappearing to nothing as they weren't used.

The doors to the courtroom opened of their own accord as he approached and he turned left towards the end of the corridor, away from the cameras and reporters. James had followed him all the way, as had Remus and Arthur.

"Unbelievable," James spat, hitting the wall hard. "I can't believe they got away with it."

"We did everything we could," Remus said, shaking his head.

"It wasn't enough," Arthur replied. "That's three Death Eaters back out there, and three more reasons to keep fighting."

"Oh we are going to fight this," Harry whispered. "If the Ministry is no longer effective then we'll just have to do it ourselves."

"What do you mean?" asked James, but Harry didn't get to answer.

"JAMES! HARRY!" called a familiar voice.

They both turned to see Lily, Melissa, and Michael walking down the corridor to greet them, and the Aurors keeping the press back let them through. Harry took a few deep breaths to calm himself and then walked over with James, Remus, and Arthur to meet them.

"We heard what happened," Lily said quietly. "This is not right."

"Of course it isn't," Melissa said angrily, her eyes sparkling with rage.

James hugged his wife and ruffled the hair on Michael's head. "There's nothing we can do about it now," he said. "Harry just has to get through his appraisal before we can think about that."

Lily nodded and turned to Harry. "Mind what you say, Harry," she said warningly. "Crouch won't suffer fools easily."

Harry sighed. "Then why is he surrounded by them?" he asked, raising his eyebrows and shrugging. "Let's just get this over with."

And with that, Harry walked past all of them and back towards the courtroom. His eyes were sparkling dangerously as well. Those that

knew him well would know that right now, he was absolutely furious. As he walked back to the oak doors, Harry saw Lucius Malfoy talking to *Prophet* reporters down the end of the corridor and for a moment he was ready to take him then and there, but he decided against it. For now, he'd make the Wizengamot sorry they ordered him to this *evaluation*.

Harry stormed back into the room just as angrily as when he had left it ten minutes ago. Everyone in the room fell silent again as he entered and Harry saw that none of them had moved. The Wizengamot was still seated on the highest benches, and all the reporters and Ministry personnel were still in their seats on the lower benches.

The only differences were that to the layout of the room. The tables, chairs and witness stand had been removed from the courtroom, and only one solitary chained chair remained in the centre of the room.

Lily, Michael, Melissa, James, Remus and even Arthur followed Harry in and then walked up the stairs to sit on the lower levels of the benches, anxious that things were not going to go according to anyone's plan.

Harry approached the chained chair and looked down to it, before looking up questioningly at the Wizengamot. "Take a seat, Mr. Potter," Crouch said imperiously, gesturing to the chain bound chair.

Harry frowned, removed his wand from his robes and then, just like Dumbledore had done for his disciplinary hearing back in the summer for his fifth year, conjured a squashy armchair out of thin air, next to the barbaric chained seat. He sat down defiantly in his own chair.

"Let's get on with this," he said angrily, waving his hand dismissively at the Wizengamot.

"I'd advise you right now, Mr. Potter," Crouch said dangerously. "To watch what you say from this point on."

Harry glared angrily at the Minister and then those in the Wizengamot that had voted to clear the Death Eaters. "And I'd advise all of you," he replied, not giving an inch. "To watch what you say, because I'm

not in the mood to see any more of the stupidity you just displayed in allowing those murderers to walk free."

Crouch opened his mouth to speak but Harry wasn't finished yet. He sat up straighter in his chair and continued. "And I apologise in advance to those of you in the Wizengamot who did vote correctly today. Please know that you made the right choice, and that my anger is not directed towards you in anyway."

"ENOUGH!" Crouch shouted, slamming his fist on the bench in front of him. "You know why you're here?" he asked Harry curtly.

Harry nodded. "You're afraid of my power and want to control me. That about right?"

Harry saw that the dozens of reporters in the room just loved his attitude. Rita Skeeter was speaking so fast into her quick Quotes Quill that she was fast running out of parchment, but her eyes never left the proceedings.

"You are here," Crouch corrected quickly. "Because of your use of dark magic on the morning of the 4<sup>th</sup>, no matter how effective it was you broke Wizarding law."

Harry nodded in agreement, but was finding it extremely hard to care. He remembered the last time he had come under the scrutiny of the entire Wizengamot back before fifth year. He had been sick to his stomach and scared of expulsion. Now he was faced with something much greater but he didn't even bat an eye. He had come so far over the last eighteen months, physically, magically and mentally.

"I did nothing but defend myself and try to end this war that half of this Wizengamot seems to want to continue," Harry said calmly, but coolly.

"Witnesses say you cast the Vestic curse. That is illegal dark magic," Crouch continued, not wasting a second. "Its use enough, whether or not it kills, means six months imprisonment in Azkaban. Now, no one is denying that you did do a very heroic thing duelling You Know Who, but your motives are not very clear."

Harry folded his hands across his chest, calming down slightly, but only slightly. "I want to end this war. I want to kill Voldemort-" Again, many theatrical gasps and screams rang out throughout the room.

"Mr. Potter," Crouch said exasperated. "If you speak that name one more time you will find that the Wizengamot will not be so lenient."

Harry stared at him incredulously. "You just let three Death Eaters walk free, how could you be any less lenient?"

Harry quickly glanced at his father to see that he had a small smile playing on his lips. He saw Michael looking at him with admiration, Melissa with indifference, and Lily with worry. He turned back to Crouch.

"At the moment, Mr. Potter," he said coldly. "You are not presenting yourself in a good light. At this rate we may have to bring charges of dark magic against you, and believe me when I say that Azkaban is a surety if that happens."

Harry felt that it was gratifying to see the looks on their faces when he just shrugged that prospect away. "Hmm..." he said. "What makes you think Azkaban can hold me, Minister Crouch?" he asked truthfully.

*He was met with silence.*

"Because it can't," Harry continued as everyone in the room looked down on him in silence. Once again the only noise coming from the scratching of quills. "Now I'm here to do one thing. I don't know what you people think you are doing? But I'm going to kill Voldemort and I don't need you lot trying to hinder me in that goal."

"You are only a boy of sixteen," one of the Wizengamot said. "You cannot hope to defeat You Know Who."

Harry glared stoically at this man. He was one of the ones who had voted to clear Malfoy and the others. "Just watch me..." he replied.

"Despite what you may think, Mr. Potter," Crouch then spoke. "Azkaban will be able to confine you if a sentence is carried out. The Dementors have the ability to drain a wizard of his pow-"

"The Dementors!" Harry cried out in disbelief. "The Dementors are still on the island!?"

"Where else would they be, Potter?" another member asked him.

Harry ignored her and kept staring at Bartemius Crouch. "Who makes sure the Dementors are still loyal to the Ministry?" he asked quickly.

Crouch bristled and Harry frowned even deeper. "Azkaban is guarded by a squad of twenty two Aurors, as well as the Dementors. And that squad of Aurors is under the command of my son, Bartemius Crouch Junior."

For one brief moment, Harry couldn't believe what he was hearing, and then it sunk in, in its entirety. "My god," he said desperately, laughing in disbelief under his breath. "Voldemort already holds Azkaban; you just don't know it yet!"

"Listen, Pot-"

"NO!" Harry shouted, jumping to his feet. "YOU LISTEN! And listen well. Voldemort - Oh for Merlins sake get a hold of yourselves! You people are supposed to be the backbone of Wizarding justice, and yet you scream in terror at the mere mention of his name. VOLDEMORT! VOLDEMORT! VOLDEMORT!"

The Wizengamot was silent now, and even the quick quills had come to an ominous stop. They simply couldn't comprehend or control this boy in front of them, who showed no fear of the evillest creature in their land.

Harry sighed and did not sit down. "Now," he said calmly, quietly. "I swear to you that all I want to do is defeat Voldemort, and I can do it, given the chance. I don't want power but I have it, and I think that is the reason I do have it. I would never use it for evil and I would like to work cooperatively with the Ministry, more specifically the Auror Division. None of those who saw me duel the other day could say I'm working against you, I'm here to work with you."

It was Crouch who spoke first, and his voice was sincere when he did. "Mr. Potter," he said. "I have been the Minister for Magic in the United



Kingdom for fifteen of the hardest years in this war. Can you honestly tell me that your only goal is to end this conflict?"

"I can honestly tell you that," Harry replied. "But let me show you instead. I am willing to fight, and for however long it takes over the coming months I'll see it through, and end this war once and for all."

Crouch and the other wizards and witches in the room were silent for a long time, and then finally the Minister responded to him. "I'm not entirely sure why," he said slowly. "But I believe you...."

Harry inclined his head. "Then where do we go from here?"

Crouch shook his head. "From here you are free to go. Matters as grave as these are best discussed between less people. We will contact you in a few days, Mr. Potter. Goodbye."

Crouch then tapped his wand against a circular golden gong that hung on the wall behind him, and the sound reverberated throughout the dungeon. It was over, the dungeon had been dismissed. Harry stood and waved his hand, causing his special chair to disappear. His family was striding down the stairs to meet him and he headed in that direction. The Wizengamot had begun to filter out of the exits on the high benches but the reporters had no such destination in mind.

They were also descending the stairs quickly to meet Harry. "We should hurry," he said as he drew level with his family.

"Right you are, Harry," James said quickly, ushering his youngest children towards the oak doors.

"I'll slow them down," Remus said. "And probably see you later next week."

"Thanks, Remus," James said, shaking his hand quickly and then heading towards the doors with Harry. "Well I don't think anybody has ever spoken to the Wizengamot like that in centuries," he smiled as he and Harry jogged up the corridor after Lily, Michael and Melissa.

"Then they had it coming," Harry answered. A few minutes later and after jostling through the crowds and outrunning the reporters, the five of them came to the golden grille of the Ministry lift.

"We can Apparate out when we get to the Atrium, Harry," James said. "What does everyone say to lunch in Diagon Alley?"

"That sounds good," Michael said, holding his stomach.

"We'll floo to the Leaky Cauldron and meet you there," Lily said, squeezing her husband's hand.

"How'd Quidditch go?" Harry asked Michael as the lift ascended towards the Atrium.

"Gryffindor won!" he exclaimed. "First time in nine years. The score was 410 - 50. Slytherin couldn't believe it."

The lift came to a sudden stop and the grille slid back to reveal the Atrium, which had been cleared of most of the reporters from earlier, but it was still crowded with ministry officials and other visitors. James and Harry stepped into the Atrium and then with a nod to each other and saying a brief goodbye to the others, Apparated away to Diagon Alley.

Harry reappeared instantly three miles away on the Apparation point in Diagon Alley. The wind felt good on his face after spending all morning and half the afternoon in that stuffy Ministry courtroom, but he had to shield his eyes against the bright light for a few moments as he adjusted to the glare.

James appeared next to him and together they moved away from the Apparation pad and up the Alley towards the Leaky Cauldron. "You turned more than a few heads today, Harry," James said quietly as they walked through the throng of shoppers. "And inspired hope in even old Barty Crouch's heart. I hope you can do those things you said."

"I can," Harry replied confidently, thankful that this day was drawing to a close. He was incredibly tired.

"Where do you go from here?"

Harry shrugged as they walked past the apothecary and then towards the brick wall that led to the Leaky Cauldron. "We go on the attack," Harry said seriously, removing his wand to tap the bricks and reveal the backdoor of the Leaky Cauldron. There was no need though, because as they approached the bricks started to move.

Harry shrugged and put away his wand, but it was in his hand again a split second later as Lily, his mother, ran desperately through the brick opening, dragging Michael behind her with tears in here eyes.

"JAMES!" she called.

"What is it!?" he asked quickly, fear flashing through and behind his eyes uncontrollably.

"IT'S MELISSA!" Lily cried, collapsing into James' shoulder. "WE- we were just about to floo away but then this- this man in black robes grabbed her and then disappeared. Oh God! James, James he used a Portkey."

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## Chapter 9 - Old Allies

*Part I:  
The board has been set.  
The pieces are moving into place.  
And the battle has begun.*

"He- He came up behind us, as we were waiting for the floo," Lily cried into James' shoulder. "Oh God! I looked right at him, saw his eyes. Then he grabbed her and disappeared. Just like that she was gone..."

Harry's face was set stoically to show no emotion, but inside his heart was pounding in his chest and he was screaming in frustration. "Did you recognise him?" he asked quickly, calmly.

Lily looked up at him with tear stained cheeks, fear and anger reflected in her emerald eyes. She shook her head slowly. "He did seem... familiar, but I don't know..."

Harry nodded and then decided to take control of this situation, as a crowd had begun to gather at the sound of Lily's cries. "Right," he said strongly, turning to face his father, who looked grief-stricken himself. "Get everyone back to Hogwarts, I'm going to-"

"You going to get her back, Harry?" Michael asked quietly, hope mingled into his teary eyes. He understood what was going on, more than most.

"I'll find her," he said, and then Disapparated with a pop.

Harry reappeared instantly, back in the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic. He immediately set off across the highly polished floor towards the fireplaces against the blue and gold wall. He saw a crowd gathered around a bunch of Ministry spellworkers and headed in that direction.

"Definitely a Portkey," he heard one of them whisper, as he drew closer and made his way through the crowd.

"Can you trace its destination?" a familiar voice asked, and Harry emerged through the crowd and beheld Albus Dumbledore, still wearing his purple Wizengamot robes.

"Professor," he said quickly, seriously.

Dumbledore turned and didn't seem the least bit surprised to see Harry. "Harry," he said by way of greeting. "We believe it was Death Eaters."

Harry moved over to Dumbledore. "Was there ever any doubt?" he asked with a shrug. "Do you know who? I swear to God if it was Mal-"

"A man a lot darker I'm afraid," Dumbledore whispered as the spellworkers cast complex charms over the area. "Voldemort's son, or so I believe as the witnesses have described him."

For one brief moment Harry's eyes widened in surprise. "Ethan..." he breathed, an image of Rafe dying on that street in Abingdon flashed through his mind. *He made mistakes, we all did, but he was a good person.*

"Sorry, Dumbledore," one of the spellworker's said, glancing at Harry. "Wherever they went, there are wards in place to stop it being traced."

"Thank you, Frank," he said, and turned back to talk to Harry, but he was gone. The only sound of his exit was a loud pop.

Harry reappeared hundreds of miles away outside the Hogwarts castle gates and set off at a run up towards the entrance. It took him five minutes and he was starting to feel tired. It had been a long day in the Wizengamot courtroom and his arm was aching terribly. *Never a dull minute though*, he thought, throwing open the castle door and entering the school.

There were a few people in the Entrance Hall who fell silent as he past, and Harry paid them no heed. *What do I do now?* he wondered. *She could be anywhere...*

The castle halls suddenly seemed very cold to Harry and a bubble of worry had begun to grow in his stomach. He stopped walking for a moment and leaned against the wall, trying to think of anything he could do. *I'll kill Voldemort for this*, he thought darkly. There were people passing him in the corridor but Harry didn't see them, he saw past them and into the ever uncertain future. *Where do I go from here?*

*You find her*, a voice in his head answered. It was the voice of reason. *You don't let them win. Stand alone once again and fight back.*

Harry nodded slowly to himself and picked himself up off the wall. "Right..." he whispered, and then turned left and walked straight into James Potter.

"Harry," James said slowly, coldly. His eyes were dark and rimmed with tears.

"Everyone get back from Diagon Alley?" Harry asked quickly. It was only James he could see, none of the other students passing by were his family.

"Yes," James again said slowly. "What do you know?"

Harry shook his head. He wasn't going to lie. "I haven't a clue where she is," he stated.

Suddenly, and unexpectedly, James grabbed Harry around the collar and pushed him back hard against the wall, knocking the breath out of him. "THAT'S NOT GOOD ENOUGH!" he cried. "THEY TOOK HER TO GET TO YOU!"

There were many gasps in the corridor as the assembled students from all years and houses watched their professor attack Harry, attack his son. For a moment no sound was heard, as James glared at Harry. Briefly, he saw the power behind Harry's eyes as they darkened and the emerald green became enflamed, but then it was gone.

"I said I'll find her and I will," Harry said quietly, not blinking or averting his gaze from James. "Let go of me."

A thousand conflicting emotions passed across James' face and then, with a sigh, he released Harry. "Whatever you're going to do, we do it together."

Harry straightened his collar as the crowds began to move again, all of them casting surreptitious glances out of the corner of their eyes at him and James. He then nodded. "Okay," he agreed. "Right now I'm heading to Dumbledore's office. Let's go."

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"The best spellworkers the Ministry has cannot trace the Portkey signature, James," Dumbledore said gently. "She has disappeared."

Harry leaned silently against the wall near Dumbledore's desk and the window he had jumped out of half a week ago. He didn't want to sit down, he wanted to be ready for anything. He saw the pain in his father's eyes though. The thought of losing another child must have been tearing him up inside. Harry admired him for the simple fact of being able to carry on.

"Well," James began hotly. "Where could they have taken her? What about all the Death Eater hideouts we know about, or the Riddle house?"

Dumbledore stood up and moved around his desk and placed a comforting, commiserating hand on James' tired shoulder. "My friend, you know as well as I do that it would be like searching for a needle in a haystack."

James frowned but then reason saw through and he nodded sadly. "But what do we do?" he whispered, almost hopelessly.

Dumbledore appeared thoughtful for a moment. "Whatever we can," he eventually said. "The Ministry has, of course, taken the abduction of a Hogwarts student seriously. All avenues of investigation are being utilised... but what do you think, Harry?"

Both his Headmaster and father turned to look at Harry, who stood with his arms folded, almost casually, against the wall. The only noticeable sign in his appearance that showed he was prepared for

anything was the subtle way his eyes flicked back and forth across the room, and occasionally out of the window. The rest of his body appeared slack, unprepared, but his eyes were more alert than anything else in that room.

"I don't think the Ministry has a chance in hell of finding her," he said honestly, knowing that even a white lie would not help any of them. "If Voldemort, and whoever's working for him, doesn't want her to be found yet, she won't be."

"We can't do nothing!" James cut in quickly. "I *won't* do nothing."

Harry nodded. "They're going to make us wait," he said carefully, frowning as he thought of how Voldemort's mind worked. He knew better than any man alive that he was a sadistic murderer, but Harry was unfortunate enough to share a link with the Dark Lord, and they had shared minds more than once. On some level he knew how Voldemort thought.

"Maybe a day," he continued. "Could be more, could be less. I don't believe they'll kill her though."

"Why is that?" James asked shakily.

"As you said," Harry replied. "They took her to get to me."

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*Darkness.*

*A pain in her side that she could not see or touch.*

Melissa slowly felt life returning to her aching and cold limbs. As consciousness returned, so did the pain that came with that. Her side burnt terribly with stinging pain that bit into her every time she struggled for a grasping breath. She realised slowly that one or more of her ribs must be broken.

After a few moments Melissa saw the only source of light in the... room... was from a small barred window, that let in only a slit of sunlight which seemed to die away before it reached her. The floor



she was lying on was cold, damp and covered in centuries of grime and dirt. The wall her back lay against was hard, and just as cold and damp as the floor. It was made of a jagged stone which was also covered in grime. As was her waist length hair, that clung in matted clumps to her head and clothes.

The only other thing Melissa noticed about wherever the hell this was, was the single solitary door that was carved into the rock, barred and made of stone. And she only noticed that because it had just opened.

Her thoughts were slow and muddled and Melissa knew the after effects of the stunning curse. Her father had taught her well in DADA. A figure stepped into the shadows of the dark cell, and his face was obscured but Melissa felt an unmistakable stab of sharp cold as she gazed up blurrily at this person.

"Who...?" she tried, but her throat cracked painfully.

"Silence," the figure whispered darkly, and the threat in his voice was unmistakable. Melissa didn't try to speak again. "Miss. Potter," the male voice then said again. "Please let me be the first to welcome you to Azkaban."

Suddenly, Melissa felt her heart skip a few beats, and she knew from the simple pragmatic way that this figure had spoken to her that there was no lie in his voice. *Azkaban!* she thought. *What did I do to end up in Azkaban?*

"I am sure you are now wondering why, of all places, you are in Azkaban?" the figure then asked, never once moving out of the shadows. Melissa feared him simply because of this, and had she known more she would have learnt that her fears were justified. "Well, for curiosities sake, the Dark Lord controls Azkaban, and you are his prisoner."

Melissa had already got that far, but the thought filled her with despair and fear beyond comprehension. Her mind struggled to recall how she had come to be here. *I was in the Ministry...* she thought slowly.

"Now," the figure continued to speak, and even in the darkness Melissa saw the smooth polished wood of his wand as he removed it

from within the pocket of his dark robes. "You are going to answer some of my questions, and please, for your own sake, answer truthfully."

Melissa suddenly found it difficult to breathe, and her head was slowly filled with the sounds of screams, and of that godforsaken day in Diagon Alley, when Harry had been killed. A tear fell from her bloodshot eye.

"The Dementors, those who remain on the island, are close," the figure whispered and Melissa heard a strange wheezing sound. It took her bereft mind a moment to realise the man in black was laughing.

"What- What do you want?" she asked quietly, her voice echoing loudly and harshly off the walls.

"I want answers," he replied. "Answers to questions that plague my Master's mind. Tell me, Miss. Potter, tell me about your brother."

Taking a deep shuddering breath, Melissa finally put all of the confused pieces together. *This was about Harry.* She had been taken because the Death Eaters wanted to know about Harry. And then strangely, she didn't have any idea of what to say. She didn't like this Harry, the one from another world. It wasn't the Harry she knew, the one she had loved, that her family had loved. He was a completely different person, and she couldn't accept him, hadn't accepted him... yet.

"Harry?" she asked quietly.

"Yes," the figure spat. "And do be quick about it! I have other lives to destroy."

Melissa swallowed slowly and more tears fell from her eyes. She didn't know what to say. *He was from another world! He has an amazing power! He said he was going to kill your Master!* "He's- He's just my brother..." she managed, looking up into the blackness, behind which this figure's face resided.

"Ignorance will not help you here, nothing will," the figure hissed.  
"Crucio!"

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### *Five Hours Later*

Harry stared once more tiredly at the stars from atop of the Astronomy tower. He knew sleep would not come for a few days, not with Melissa missing. He barely even knew her, but she was, despite the fact that this wasn't his universe, his sister.

"God damn it," he whispered frustrated, angry more at himself than anything else. *You should have stayed with them!* his mind screamed at him. *You should have known! How many more mistakes are you going to make? Lesser ones have gotten people killed before.*

The sky was absolutely clear and the stars stretched on as far as Harry could see, across the heavens and out until his view disintegrated into darkness, like so much else these days. It was a warm spring night and Harry was still dressed in his Muggle trousers and black collared shirt. The breeze that blew up here on top of the castle and Harry's world was relaxing and did let him think.

*Darker forces had other plans though.* Harry saw it first a few hundred feet away, even in the darkness and small light provided by the stars and moon. The glint of two sharp eyes on the wind, and the whoosh of a pair of wings that flew through the night and towards him on top of the tower. It was an owl, and it was about a minute's flight away.

"Harry," a familiar voice whispered behind him, but Harry had already heard this person coming, and didn't take his eyes of the approaching owl.

"Hello, James," Harry said slowly, watching the pair of eyes that had locked onto his own. This owl was meant for him.

"I couldn't sleep," James said, walking over and standing next to Harry. "I didn't think you would be up here this late, I mean I know you told me you would be-"

"Look," Harry whispered, and pointed out towards the approaching owl, summoning a ball of bright light into his palm as he did, that for a few seconds illuminated the sky like a lighthouse does at night.

James saw it, and his heart constricted in his chest. "Do you think-"

"I do," Harry said as the bird was now on top of them, dropping its letter towards Harry without even landing, and then turned and was back off into the darkness of the night sky. Not wasting a moment, Harry snatched the letter off the stone wall in front of him and tore it open.

*Azkaban. Before the Sun rises.*

Harry read the letter and then suddenly it burst into purple flames, and a loud cackle was heard that rang out into the night sky. He brushed the hot sparks from his hands quickly and turned to James, who had paled considerably.

"We may have a problem," Harry said slowly, recalling all he knew about the island prison. *It was off the west coast of Scotland. Dementor's and Death Eaters. Barty Crouch Jr oversaw it.* Harry had to assume that Azkaban was under Voldemort's control, and he knew that Melissa wouldn't be leaving that island alive as long as he was.

"What is it?" James asked, fear and anticipation flowing across his eyes.

"She's in Azkaban."

It was a long moment before James spoke again, and Harry watched him intently in what little light there was. He once again saw all the conflicting emotions on his father's face, which finally settled into a look of stony determination. He was prepared to do absolutely anything.

"Will you go?" James asked.

Harry nodded slowly. "I don't know where it is, but I'll go."

"You have power enough to tear that island apart, Harry," James then said. "We'll go together." Again, Harry nodded but there was indecision in his mind and on his face. James recognised it for what it was. "You have a problem with this?"

"No," Harry replied, his eyes dark and hollow. "But besides Voldemort, Dementors are the one thing I have trouble killing. Can we handle them?"

James shrugged, beyond caring. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

Turning away from the balcony, Harry led the way down through the dark astronomy tower and then through the many ancient corridors of the castle. "We should tell Dumbledore," he began, but James cut him off.

"He's in London," he said quickly. "Sorting out the mess that is the Wizengamot. What we saw early yesterday morning was too much. The corruption is obvious."

Harry nodded and checked his watch. It was Sunday, but only just. Twelve thirty a.m. "What do we do then?"

James frowned but then led Harry down a corridor towards the moving staircases. "I want you to promise me, Harry," he said. "Promise me you're powerful enough to take that island alone."

"I believe I am," he replied. "Just get me there and I'll do the rest. How are you planning on doing it?"

They descended the staircases quickly, taking the steps two at a time, until they came to the Entrance Hall. "I have a friend, an old friend," James said. "An instructor of mine during Auror training. He's retired now and lives on the coast of Scotland. Last time I saw him he'd just bought a Muggle speedboat. I'm hoping he still has it."

"What's his name?" Harry asked as they threw open the Entrance Hall doors and stepped back out into the warm night.

James took a deep breath and then spoke. "Trask," he said. "Dermas Trask."

\*\*\*\*

Two lone figures cut across the dark Hogwarts grounds towards the castle gates and beyond the line of the Apparation wards. It was early in the morning, barely one o'clock and the world about them was silent.

"Shouldn't you have told Lily where we were going?" Harry asked, approaching the gates.

"With any luck," he said, "if she's asleep we could be back before she gets up."

Harry didn't say anything, but he knew that his life was never that simple. He was preparing himself for the worst, for the inevitable.

"Where we headed now?"

"Up and over the Firth of Clyde," James answered. "Further up the coast and out into the island chains up there, past Oban and onto a small island that has a seaside town and port known as Tiree. Azkaban can be reached from there."

They passed the ward line and James grabbed Harry's shoulder. Without even waiting a moment, he Apparated both of them dozens, if not hundreds of miles up the country.

Harry stumbled as he reappeared and the first sound he heard was that of oceanic waves crashing against the dry sea wall away somewhere in the darkness around them. He couldn't see much, but he could also hear boats bobbing in the dock around them. He looked around quickly and away to his left, a stream of lights ran from the boathouse and back out along the town of Tiree, stretching up onto a large hill and as far as Harry could see.

"This way," James said and Harry realised they were standing on a dock built on the water. There was not a soul around at this time of night, and Harry found himself clutching his wand instinctively.

He followed James through the darkness for about ten minutes, as they walked along the port and dock side of the town, towards a group of about a dozen houses that looked as if they belonged to Muggles, and probably did. Harry's eyes flew up to the sky but there was a fair amount of cloud cover out here, and the moon was obscured.

Neither of them spoke as they walked, and it was cold this close to the coast and they were close enough to the water that occasionally the spray hit Harry. In time they arrived at one of the old houses that lined the beach, built on the sand and pebble, far enough away from the tide line.

The house they approached was dilapidated, and one of the windows was smashed and boarded with wood. "I doubt anyone lives here," Harry said, thinking of what he knew of Dernas.

James' eyes were hard. "He's here," he said, motioning to a sea hawk that sat perched on an old chair that stood gathering dust on the front porch of this isolated house. "That's him."

With a screech, the hawk took flight and soared through the air towards them. Just before it reached them, Harry saw the glint of its eyes focus on him and then James, before, in one brief second, it blurred and standing before them was a tall man with a brown beard, speckled here and there with white hairs.

"James Potter," Dernas Trask said. "I knew someone had triggered the Apparation warning I'd set up, but I never thought it would be you. What can I do you for?"

Harry realised that Dernas may be the only wizard or magical being on this island, for an Apparation warning ward to work that would be necessary. He remembered suddenly that Dernas' fiancé had died in the war in his world, and he had gone into retirement.

*Is this where he had lived before coming to train Harry with the sword?*

"I need help, Dernas," James said seriously. "This is Harry, by the way."

Dermas looked him up and down coldly, untrustingly for a moment, but then smiled in a familiar way. "Well you grew up," he said, slapping Harry on the back. "James told me you were dead, probably for the best though if you were in hiding. Read about you in the *Prophet* the other day, of course. How've you been keeping?"

Harry shuffled his feet uncomfortably. "That's a long... and complicated story. Some other time would be better."

"We need you and your boat, Dermas," James said. "We need you to take us out to sea."

Dermas frowned and stroked his beard in thought. "Why would you want to go out into that?" he asked, waving his hand towards the millions upon millions of galleons of water that crashed against the shore a few dozen feet away. "There's nothing out there..." he continued, but then his eyes widened. "Except for-"

"Azkaban," James and Harry said in unison.

Dermas, for a moment, tapped his foot thoughtfully in some sand, before pulling out a hipflask and taking a deep drink from it, draining the silver flask. "I think," he said calmly, looking at the object in his hand. "That I may need some more whiskey, and that you need to find someone else's boat." Trask's eyes flashed dangerously. "I'm through with that damn war, James. Don't drag me back into it...."

Dermas turned to walk away, and Harry saw that he still walked with a limp, just like in his own world. "Please," he said, and Trask stopped moving. "Just listen to what we have to say."

Half an hour later, and the three of them were seated in Dermas' boat around the side of his house, discussing the situation. Harry and James had explained what they knew, that Melissa had been kidnapped and was likely to be killed unless they got to Azkaban. It was, of course, impossible to Apparate there and only Portkeys made on the actual island would work. The boat was there only hope.

"I'm still not entirely sure what you think you can do," Dermas said. "What you think we can do. Voldemort himself may be on that godforsaken island, and I know you couldn't have overlooked the



Dementors, Death Eaters, hundreds of deranged prisoners and probably a nasty ward or two that will be standing against us."

"Harry can handle most of that," James said dismissively. "We just need to get to that island. Drop us off, you can turn around and head back here after that."

Harry looked around at the boat that was supposedly going to take them to Azkaban, if they could convince Dermal. There wasn't much light but he could tell this speedboat wasn't in the best condition. The wood was snapped in several places, along the sides and up the front on the panels. If it had ever been painted that paint had rusted or flaked away to nothing, leaving a cool grey of whatever metal held this tub together. The outboard motor, looked brand new surprisingly, and smelled strongly of oil and fuel. The windshield was just a frame, the glass long ago smashed, and the only chair on the 'boat' was torn and snapped along its support.

"Can this thing get us there?" Harry asked, waving his hand towards the cracks in the wood.

Dermal laughed harshly. "Probably not, but as long as you can cast some quick repair charms on the way we should be right."

"So you'll take us, Dermal?" James asked, leaning against the side of the boat.

Dermal Trask sighed with a weariness felt by many these days, and then turned and looked out towards the sea, towards the sound of crashing waves. He thought of the war, and how this mission, this attack on Azkaban, would probably kill them all. With that in mind, he slowly nodded.

"Are you sure about this?" Harry asked.

"You know," Trask said, stroking his beard. "Right now I'm reminded of a very deep and profound Australian proverb..."

"And what is that?" asked James darkly, not in the mood for much of anything anymore. He just wanted his daughter back.

Dermas stared at both of them seriously for a moment, and then stood up and walked out onto the panelled wood on the front of his speedboat, and took a deep breath. "I think it went a little something like this... FUCK IT! LET'S DO IT."

\*\*\*\*

The small boat sped across the vast expanse of the sea. Dozens of miles of nothingness spread around them in all directions, and the cold spray of the ocean whacked Harry in the face incessantly, covering his glasses in small droplets of salt water.

The sun was slowly rising in the east behind them and it cast the pale light of dawn upon the ocean before them. It was enough light to see by, or to be seen by. The rising of the sun also meant they were drawing close to the deadline, and that Azkaban was near.

"WE'RE ABOUT A HALF HOUR AWAY! MAYBE LESS..." Dermas called. "I WOULD THINK. WE SHOULD BEGIN TO FEEL THE WARD LINE SOON. PROBABLY ABOUT FIVE MILES."

Harry cast a quick sealing spell on the deteriorating hull of the boat, and banished a few litres of water back into the sea. "WE'RE CLOSE," he shouted above the noise of the outboard motor. "WE'RE CLOSE." He sat down and shook his head of the sounds and images of the worst parts of his life, and took a few deep breaths to shake off the feeling of the cold he knew was only going to increase.

"Are you okay?" James asked, talking into his ear.

Harry nodded, but he felt sick. He could already feel the effects of the Dementors, even this far out.

"I DON'T SEE IT ANYWHERE!?" Harry shouted towards Trask.

"EH? OH! WELL YOU WOULDN'T," he replied. "NOT UNTIL WE PASS THROUGH THE INVISIBILITY WARD. IT SHIELDS THE ENTIRE ISLAND, ALSO HELPS TO MAKE IT UNPLOTTABLE."

"*Reparo!*" James whispered, repairing one of the wooden panels that threatened to snap off and fly away in the wind.

Suddenly, Dernas turned sharply and a thick jet of water spray hit Harry in the face. He shrugged it off and cast a quick drying charm over his clothes, which was still the fancy shirt and pants he had worn to the Wizengamot trials nearly twenty four hours ago. He hadn't slept since that morning, and his head was pounding with the pain coupled with the lack of sleep and the Dementors.

*For the first time in months, Harry actually felt afraid of the approaching fight.*

Dementors were his fear, and they were on the island in their dozens, probably hundreds. Although the ocean he could see around him for miles, in the rising light, was completely empty and devoid of life and any structures, he knew that the island prison was close. He took another deep breath and held his hand to his forehead, willing the pain to relent.

"ANY MINUTE NOW, LADS!" Dernas cried in his strong Irish accent. "WE'RE DEFINITELY GOING TO FEEL IT WHEN WE PASS THROUGH THOSE WARDS. LET'S HOPE WE DON'T CAPSIZE."

Harry had been on this boat for about four hours, and the constant sound and thrumming of the motor had become bearable in that time, but now, as the Dementors approached, it just drove into his head like a nail. He felt sick to his stomach, and the fight hadn't even begun yet. It may have been a mistake coming here.

**BOOM!**

Suddenly, the front of the speedboat was lifted six feet above the level of the choppy ocean, as a loud explosion was heard and a large spherical cone of orange light reverberated around the boat as it fishtailed wildly in the water, several of the cracks and repaired wood boards splintering and falling away.

Harry was thrown hard to the floor as water began to gush into the boat fast. He hit his head on one of the panels and for a moment saw stars. His clothes were drenched instantly as the freezing water bit into his skin. "**REPARO!**" he cried towards the biggest splintery hole. "**REPARO! REPARO! REPARO!**" He stood again and he and James quickly began to banish the sea water from within the boat, as

Dermas struggled for control. The pain in his head was now pounding into his skull relentlessly.

"COME ON NOW YOU METAL BASTARD!" Dermas cried, accelerating and turning the wheel hard to the right, breaking out of the grip of the wards with another bang. The orange light instantly died down and they were soon skimming once again over the water, and it was then that Harry first saw Azkaban.

They had, obviously, just passed through the wards that surrounded the island in a one mile perimeter, and anyone monitoring it on the island would know of their coming now. But the island itself was an awesome sight to behold. Sharp jagged rock was thrust forth from the sea like a string of cruel teeth that formed a ring around the dark land, and sand of the single beach.

Harry could see a small jetty that would be the picking up and dropping off point. The prison itself rose up and high into the sky. It was solid stone and frowned menacingly down upon their small boat which sped defiantly towards the hideous structure, that seemed to deflect the pale sunlight that tried to hit it.

It was a simple structure, four walls and a flat roof on which more cells were kept. But it was undeniably affected and tainted from having the Dementors roam its halls for centuries. The brick seemed to collect grime, or just simply hadn't been cleaned in decades. There were windows along the different levels and some of them appeared to be nothing more than mere slits. It was a prison, and there didn't seem to be any sign of life anywhere.

*So this is Azkaban, Harry thought. This is where Sirius spent twelve years of his life.*

"ANYONE ON THAT ISLAND WOULD HAVE HEARD OR SEEN THAT!" Dermas called. "I THINK WE CAN EXPECT A WELCOMING PARTY."

"I'LL SEE TO THAT," Harry replied and turned towards the small jetty they were fast approaching.

At first he couldn't see anyone or anything on the rickety wooden jetty, and nothing but the sound of the waves breaking upon it and the boat reached his ears. But then they came swarming over the rocky, dark rise that led to the prison, and Harry braced himself as best he could for the fight.

"SHITE!" Dernas called, as twelve or so Death Eaters appeared on the jetty, with more following quickly, wands already drawn and the beginnings of incantations on the tips of their tongues.

"KEEP HEADING TOWARDS THAT PIER, DERMAS," Harry called. "BUT BE READY TO DO SOME QUICK DODGING."

"You got a plan?" James asked, standing next to him with his own wand drawn, observing the two dozen or so Death Eaters that had run to greet them.

Harry shrugged. "I usually just take it as it comes. We'll see what happens..."

James laughed harshly, staring up in awe at the peak of Azkaban prison. "Forgive me if I'm not overly inspired with confidence...."

*The pieces have moved into place. And the battle has begun.*

"IF THE MINISTRY CAN STILL MONITOR THE WARDS AS WELL," shouted Trask, swaying the boat across the sea sporadically, to keep the enemy on their toes. "THEY WOULD KNOW WE BROKE THROUGH THEM, AND AURORS COULD BE ON THEIR WAY."

"I DOUBT IT," Harry replied. "WE'RE ON OUR OWN."

Trask's collapsing speedboat, which seemed only to be held together by the rust now, boomed along the final stretch of sea towards Azkaban prison. As they approached, Dernas decided not to slow down, and instead increased his speed. With the current engine and weight on board, the boat could reach a top speed of no more than sixty five miles an hour. Still pretty fast, but would it be enough...

The brown wood panelled boat ripped along the ocean alone, cutting through the waves, at sixty miles per hour. The fastest Trask had

ever tried to push it lately, since the last time he had performed any kind of maintenance on it would have been three years ago. Ahead of them, twenty six Death Eaters lined the pier and the slight incline of dirty beach and land beyond that.

They were close now, and Harry's head was ringing with the pain of the Dementors. He had no time for that though, as the curses began to rain down upon them, threatening to destroy their small boat, their lifeline, before they had even reached the island.

They were still several hundred feet out, so the aim and strength of some of the curses was not great. Torrents of water exploded up and around them as curses of destruction slammed uselessly into the sea. Dernas swerved these explosive 'mines' of water and magic with a fierce glint in his eyes that Harry knew well. It was a glint he had many times thought of as madness.

The noise was deafening. Cries of curses from the rocky island, the outboard motor, the explosions from the curses, and the sounds of screams in his head from the Dementors. Steeling himself against the noise, Harry raised his palms and began deflecting curses away from their small craft. Thankfully, none of the curses were the Killing curse at this distance, and Harry had no trouble redirecting all the blasting and destructive spells that lit up the early morning sky outside Azkaban.

He stumbled and almost fell though, as Trask pushed the boat over a larger wave, that was growing to crash against the island. James caught him under his arms strongly, and pushed him back onto his feet. This had, of course, left them undefended for a moment, and Dernas swore heavily and profusely as he swerved to avoid a dozen or so blasting curses.

"THESE BASTARDS ARE NOTHING IF NOT PERSISTENT!" he cried, turning the wheel so sharply and fast that the boat spun uncontrollably in a three hundred and sixty degree circle, narrowly avoiding the red light that would have destroyed them.

This spin had thrown both James and Harry to the floor hard, and it was only because of the quick reflexes that Dernas Trask possessed

in those next vital seconds that they continued to live into the next few seconds beyond that. "WHAT NOW LADS?"

Harry stood shakily and threw a palm full of raw pure magic, into the path of a blasting curse. It hit it dead on in mid-air and both exploded in a ball of dark red flames that screamed into sparks, dissolving to nothing as they hit the salty water. Observing the pier, and the Death Eaters upon it and behind it, Harry saw an option, and with a small, dark smile he decided to take it.

Deflecting a few curses he ran over to Trask at the wheel. They were fast approaching the narrow strip of land that was Azkaban Island, and as such the water was becoming vastly shallower. In a few moments it would only be waist high, and one of the sea breaks that surrounded the island kept the waves and water relatively calm, although it was still dangerously choppy.

"Dermas," he said, leaning over to Trask and talking into his ear. "How much do you like this boat?"

Trask frowned but answered. "Only yesterday I was contemplating selling it to the Muggle scrapyard for fifty quid... why?"

Harry's eyes hardened and he looked towards the pier, as James cast a quick shield charm to deflect several curses. "Because... I want you to crash it into that jetty, as fast as you can."

For a few seconds Dermas only stared at him, but then swore as he failed to avoid a blasting curse, and a massive hole was blown into the front of the boat. Thankfully it was only the body on top of the wooden panels, and not in the hull or side. They didn't start taking on water. He then began to laugh and that glint of madness was back in his eyes. "How close do you want me to get before we jump out of this tub?"

Harry rubbed the small stubble that was growing on his face. He hadn't shaved in a day or so. "I'll put up a shield in front of us. Just drive as straight as you can towards those Death Eaters. When we're within twenty feet, jump."

Trask nodded and then pushed the throttle down as far as it would go. Harry stumbled back over to James as they put on an impressive burst of speed and told him the plan. His father nodded shakily and continued to deflect the curses. Closing in to one hundred and fifty feet, they were travelling above sixty miles per hour, and were practically skimming across the sea. Raising his arms, Harry called forth his strongest shield and kept it steady two feet in front of the point of the boat, which Trask had lined up with the side of the dock, as the approached it from the right.

Two dozen curses pounded against Harry's shield and sent ripples tearing across it, like a stone being thrown into water. He held it fast though and soon nothing could stop them. James stood beside his son and made sure his wand was tightly secured in his robe pocket. He knew this jump into the sea was going to hurt in more ways than one.

Trask screamed loudly into the air and pushed the boat for one final run. He had to swerve only slightly to avoid a small bank of underwater rocks and sand, as they could see the ocean floor now, but then it was done. The Death Eaters were still trying to destroy their approaching vessel, but Harry's shield saw to them. And then they passed the twenty feet mark, and as one Trask let go of the wheel, and he, Harry and James threw themselves overboard and into the freezing waters of the North Atlantic Ocean.

Harry hit the water first, and it felt instantly that all the air had been sucked from his lungs and a thousand short stabs of pain ripped into his body. The water was freezing, shockingly slow and he cried out in pain, both from the high speed fall and from the cold. He struggled viciously to stand and began to shiver uncontrollably as his feet came in contact with the sand and rock of the ocean floor. He managed to stand, and found that the water rose a little bit above his waist.

Derms and James were floundering around near him, both equally chilled in this frigid water, but it was then that the small boat, still skimming across the surface of the ocean at top speed, collided and crashed into the pier. Harry watched as the Death Eaters began to scatter, realising all too late that the boat wasn't about to stop. A



loose blasting curse destroyed the driver's side seat and then the boat slammed into the pier, killing three men instantly.

Half a dozen or so had made it off the jetty and were now retreating back over the rise and up the hill to regroup with their fellow Death Eaters, but seven or eight died as the boat exploded in a brilliant ball of orange flames, which cast jagged wood and shrapnel scattering in a wide radius, cutting one Death Eater in half.

The jetty collapsed in on itself and the waves caused by the impact knocked Harry, James, and Dermal back off their feet, which felt numb in the cold water. "Come on," Harry said, grasping their arms and pulling them through the freezing water. Harry found it strange that no Death Eaters could be seen, but right now his number one objective was to get out of this water alive.

The three of them staggered onto the sandy beach alone, cold, soaked through and having trouble breathing. Thinking fast, Harry cast a drying and warming charm over the immediate area and a few moments later the three of them stood up and drew their wands.

"Dear Merlin..." breathed Trask. "Did that just happen?"

"Where are they?" James asked, casting his wand in a large arc across the small beach and towards the nearby destroyed pier and boat. There were hundreds of rocks rising above them, not quite a cliff as the incline wasn't steep, but it was hundreds of places for an enemy to hide. And beyond this hill and field of rocks, stood Azkaban, towering dangerously over them.

"They're up there," Harry said. "Not far up there either. I'd say behind that row of large boulders," he pointed towards seven evenly placed giant boulders. "We have to go carefully."

They trudged up the beach and over to the remains of the pier, and began to follow the broken dirt path that wound up the hillside towards Azkaban. This island was by no means big, and they were now walking on the only patch of land within five hours of speedboat travel, and the rest of it was jagged, harsh rock. It was a terrible place, and at some level all three of them were beginning to feel the effects

of the Dementors up in the fortress. And that is why none of them noticed the ambush until it was upon them.

They had descended only thirty feet up the dirt track towards the prison, their feet leaving tracks and prints in the muddy trail behind them. The dry clothes they wore blew in the wind and each of them was battling their own demons within their minds.

"I never thought I'd set foot on this island," Trask whispered, pulling his robes closer around himself, but keeping his wand raised in defence.

"I kind of always knew I would," Harry shrugged.

"I once delivered a shipload of prisoners here ten years ago," James said. "As an Auror, never entered the prison though."

"Was I still teaching then?" Trask asked James, and for the first time since meeting him again, Harry saw the glimmer of a sword underneath his robes. He was still a blade master.

"You may just have been," James said, but then sucked in his breath sharply. Up ahead on the path stood ten Death Eaters, all robed, all with their wands drawn.

Harry had noticed them first though, and he continued to walk towards them, his face set in a grim determination. He pushed the Dementors from his mind for now, but they still gnawed at his consciousness. He took a deep breath.

"Drop your wands!" shouted one of the Death Eaters. Harry didn't know this voice, and he wasn't about to drop his wand. He continued to advance.

James and Dermal followed behind Harry up the hill towards the only visible force of Death Eaters. None of them noticed those that appeared behind them, either from behind boulders and rocks or from under invisibility cloaks. Their trap had been set, and sprung.

"Drop your wands now or die!" The same Death Eater cried.

Coldly, Harry raised his wand expertly towards this man. "Take it if you can," he said, and was surprised to hear the man laugh.

"Look behind you, Potter!" he said, and Harry turned sharply to see another dozen Death Eaters closing in on them from behind. As soon as he did that half a dozen more rose from behind rocks on his left, and five on his right. All in all there was about thirty Death Eaters surrounding them, and beginning to close in.

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news," Trask whispered, keeping his wand raised on the approaching group. "But we're up shit creek without a paddle. Any ideas, Harry, James?"

"None spring to mind," James said. "But we're not leaving here without Melissa. Harry?"

Harry surveyed the approaching men and woman; all robed in standard issue Death Eaters dress, complete with mask. None of them wore masks that were red though, so these people were not of the inner circle. They could be inside the prison, or maybe elsewhere. *Slytherin Fortress perhaps.*

"We're going to have to fight our way through," Harry said, his eyes hardening again as he prepared himself to kill. "Take as many as you can... I'll do the rest."

"There are *thirty* of them," Trask whispered.

"Then that's ten each," Harry replied, just as the Death Eater who had spoken raised his wand above his head, to cast the Killing curse.

Harry knew that the fight was upon them and his awesome skills kicked in. His reaction was automatic, fast, and almost instantaneous. It came from six years of fighting and learning. He brought up his right wand hand and his glowing left palm. Taking a step forward he heard the beginnings of the Killing curse clearly in the frozen, sterile light of dawn.

"AVA-"

"*AROS CRI!*" Harry bellowed, waving his wand in a swinging motion. Just like when he had duelled Voldemort five days ago, six silver arrows shot out of the end of his wand. Three of the ten Death Eaters in front of him, including the man casting the curse, died only a brief second later.

And then it rained magic.

Instantly furious at the loss of more of their number, the Death Eaters began to cast every dark curse they could think of, as Harry, James and Dermas moved into defensive positions. Many of the curses hit Harry's newly constructed shield and deflective charms, whilst others hit the muddy ground.

Dirt and sticks flew through the air, and rained down just as heavily as the curses. Harry staggered as a small rock hit his wounded shoulder, but held on and started to fire his own curses, towards the Death Eaters above them, who held the advantage of higher ground.

Abandoning his shield, a severing curse managed to break through and sliced open his left arm. In the heat of the battle, Harry didn't feel a thing and only hoped Dermas and James could manage for a few moments as he destroyed the enemy. Running up the hill towards a group of thirteen Death Eaters, who had banded together and were advancing towards the three men, Harry's hands found his targets with ease and dreadful accuracy.

Three Death Eaters were at the head of the crowd, and Harry downed them with powerful Vestic curses which shattered their shields. Knowing those three had died instantly, he moved on. He dodged a killing curse by sidestepping it and then retaliated with two bone breaking charms, one from his palm and one from the wand.

James and Dermas stuck close behind Harry, and deflected curses that came from below. The hillside had become a pockmarked mess in only a few minutes, and more curses were hot in the air.

Six years of magic had changed Harry beyond most people's comprehension. He had, in the worst terms, become a killer. War always required sacrifices on everyone's part, and Harry had made more than most. He had bargained with his very soul at times and not

just at the mouth of a Dementor - no. Taking a life also took part of the man doing the killing, and unless there is a damn good reason for it, or it is for the greater good overall, this leads down the path of darkness, and at the end of it is what Tom Riddle became.

Redemption sometimes didn't seem possible to Harry, and he sometimes wondered what he did to deserve the loyalty of those around him, and, of course, for Ginny's love back in his own world. But then that was what this was all about, and the killing came full circle.

*Love and War.* Two equal halves of a much greater picture, that has been painted over thousands of years and will most likely continue to be painted for thousands more. Human emotion, driven on by circumstance... and by morals and principles. Harry gambled with his soul, and only his emotions, governed by his morals, kept him sane and alive.

But right now he was taking life with a terrible ease, and no force in this world could stop him.

Three blasting curses erupted from his hand and wand, lighting up his face with red light. They hit two Death Eaters in the chest and they exploded in a bloody mess. A hot cutting curse flew past Harry's head, close enough to tear a line from beneath his eye and across his ear. Harry didn't feel it, didn't even know it had happened.

All three of them threw themselves to the ground as six Killing curses were fired simultaneously. They passed only inches above them, colliding in the air and rocketed up into the sky, where they turned and rained down upon the Death Eaters. Another four fell.

Not wasting a second, knowing lives depended on it, Harry retaliated with four fireball charms, two from each hand. Not many of the original group of Death Eaters were standing anymore, and those that were had ceased advancing and were now giving their all to stay alive.

Harry's fireball charms, coupled with his pure magic and sheer force of will, tore through their meagre shields and crashed into the group.

Four of them burst into flames and screamed until dead, the others cast Killing curses, moving away from their smouldering friends.

James managed to take out three Death Eaters to the left of them, and one below and Dermas was on his fifth. Three minutes had past since they walked into this trap, and what was once thirty Death Eaters was now only eight. Harry had decimated their forces, gaining a few cuts and bruises for his trouble.

The speed at which his curses flew through the air was unrivalled. Nothing could stop them. Shields broke under his power, men fell before him, and he didn't stop. Only two Death Eaters were left twenty feet or so above them on the hill, and with a thought Harry levitated them into the sky, and threw them towards the rocks. At the last moment he caught them though, and his morality caught up with him.

*"STUPEFY! STUEFY!"* he bellowed, and the two men were unconscious for a very long time.

Harry turned on his heel, just in time to grab James and Dermas by their collars and throw them to the ground once again. Harry jumped to the left as six Killing curses cut across their path, all coming from the only group of remaining Death Eaters. These curses missed, and hit the land above them instead, throwing rock high into the air.

The shield Harry had conjured only a few minutes ago was long gone, but a few of his deflective nets and charms were still in operation, and thinking back now he knew it was those that had saved their lives under the barrage of destructive curses. He sighed and turned his attention towards the final Death Eaters.

Knowing the game was up; two of them produced Portkeys from within their robes and grabbed the person next to them, disappearing to safety. This only left two Death Eaters standing, with no hope of escape. Apparation was impossible and neither of them could produce a Portkey.

Harry advanced on them and raised his palm. It was glowing with magic. Seeing him, the two Death Eaters wisely dropped their wands and fell to their knees. Harry's face was impassive as he approached,

stained with blood and his eyes glinting dangerously, he was a sight to fear.

A quick stunning spell and the man on the left fell unconscious. Harshly ripping the mask from the other's face, Harry pointed his wand directly between the fearful man's eyes.

"What's waiting for us in the prison?" he asked calmly, but the threat in his voice was unmistakable. James and Dernas watched silently from behind him. "Speak quickly or you will die."

Harry didn't recognise the blonde haired man, but he knew fear when he saw it. As expected, the man spoke. "D-Dementors," he managed.

"How many?" Harry asked. "I'll know if you're lying."

The man shrugged helplessly, looking at James and then back to Harry. "I'm not sure..." he mumbled. "Fifty... maybe. The Dark Lord moved most of them to his fortress."

"Where is his fortress?"

The man shook his head. "No one can tell you that."

Harry felt that the man was telling the truth in this matter. "Are there any more Death Eaters up in the prison?" The man nodded as Harry's wand tip glowed red. "How many?"

"More than enough!" he spat. "None of you will leave here alive."

"*Stupefy!*" Harry said, and turned away before the man hit the ground.

Dernas and James stood before him, both staring at him with a profound respect and awe. "We should keep going," Harry said and walked in between them and continued on towards the prison, which stood eight hundred feet above them, on the top of the long hill.

"I never knew such a power could exist," Dernas said carefully, falling in step next to Harry.

"It shouldn't," Harry replied, shaking his head. "But it has saved my life more than once."

"We're probably going to need it again," James said, limping on Harry's right. He had taken a rather painful curse to the leg during the fight. "Merlin knows what we're going to find in this place."

They walked in silence the rest of the way up the hill, until finally they stood before the impressive doors of Azkaban prison. On the left, next to a small guardhouse, lay a corpse in white robes. It was an Auror. From the looks of him, and from the smell, he had been dead several weeks.

Harry turned away and looked towards the doors, which loomed up threateningly before them, like a large guardian staring down with awesome power. The Sun had risen behind them, casting light on the door, Harry turned away and stared back from the top of the hill and out over the vast ocean.

There was nothing for all the miles of the sea in any direction. Smoke rose from the remains of the boat and pier down on the water's edge, and the hillside was littered with the bodies of those who had stood against them. Finally, he turned away from the sparkling water and looked back to the doors of Azkaban, just as they creaked open ominously, seemingly of their own volition.

The three of them stood before the doorway that no sunlight seemed to want to enter. They had battled against all odds to come here, and now it seemed as if they were expected after all. *Had the thirty Death Eaters down below been a test?* A freezing wind blew from within the prison, and nothing but darkness could be seen.

For a moment Harry, James, and Dermal Trask just stood there, before the doors of Azkaban, and waited. They all stared into the darkness and could not see farther than ten feet into the prison. Each of them felt a shiver of fear, and could hear the sucking rattling breath of the Dementors, hiding somewhere in the darkness.

Tired and bruised and reliving their worst memories, battling their inner demons, the three of them stared into the darkness. Harry took the first step onto the cold stone inside the prison, leaving the dirt



track behind. James followed and then stoically, Dernas took up the rear.

The three of them walked into Azkaban alone, and no sooner were they clear of the doors than they came crashing closed behind them. Harry ignited his wand, and turned to face his companions.

"This is it," he said. "We have to see this through to the end now."

James had accepted this, as his daughter's life was on the line. He stood next to Harry and they both looked at Dernas steadily. They had dragged him into this, and now there was a fairly good chance he could die. In the end it was his choice to continue

Trask stared unwaveringly back at both of them. "Hard to believe that only five hours ago I was the proud owner of fifty quids worth of scrap metal," he said regretfully, and then sighed. "Let's just stick together, I hate Dementors."

Harry led the way, and each of them stumbled and almost fell over the rough tiled floor of the prison. The walls were damp but Harry kept his hand on one to steady himself, as there was no light but that of his wand. The rattling breath of the Dementors they all knew to be there seemed to be coming from everywhere and then nowhere. It was reverberating off of the walls and through their minds. Like a splinter that couldn't be removed, it just dug in deeper and got louder as they progressed further into Azkaban.

"Can you produce a patronus, Trask?" Harry asked as they turned a corner. There was a pinprick of light at the end of this corridor, and Harry knew instantly that Azkaban was a lot bigger on the inside than it appeared on the outside. The pinprick of light was at least half a mile away.

"Damn," Trask said. "Just like the bloody Tardis!" Both Harry and James stared at him uncomprehendingly, and Dernas just shook his head. It would be too much to explain now.

"Sometimes I worry about you, Trask," James said. "And you have a fox for a patronus, don't you?"

"Aye," Dernas nodded. "Large fox."

"I think we're going to need that all too soon," Harry said, staring at the light in the distance. "I believed that Death Eater when he said there were fifty Dementors here. There could be more."

"Let's just find Melissa and get out of here," James whispered. "I wish I'd left Lily a note now."

"Why's that?" Dernas asked.

"Because if this island doesn't kill me, she will!" he replied. "She'll be worried."

Harry continued to lead the way at a fast pace, swinging the light from his wand up and down the corridor and all over the floor, highlighting loose stone or dangerous steps. "No sense worrying about it now," he told James, as water dripped down their necks from above.

They walked on in silence for about five minutes. The only sound was their footsteps and the rattled breathing of the Dementors, wherever they were. James saw in the light of Harry's wand that his son looked desperately sick. He put a hand on his shoulder. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Just too close to the Dementors," Harry whispered, shuddering. "I'll be fine."

The light grew as they approached and soon Harry extinguished his wand, as it flooded the entire corridor. The cruelly cut brick was revealed under the low flames of the torches that lined the walls, and Harry saw a small wooden door up ahead. He put his hand on the wrought iron knob cautiously, and then turned it. The door swung open and all three of them beheld a strange sight.

"Welcome to Azkaban," said a familiar voice to Harry. It came from a man who was seated in the centre of the room beyond the door, and he was seated in a comfy plush armchair, sipping a cup of tea and smiling at them happily. There were three chairs to his left and he motioned to them now. "Please have a seat. We were only expecting one but allowances have been made."

Harry frowned and he stepped cautiously into the room. It was a simple square, with a set of stairs that led up into darkness on the left, and a few desks and holding chains. It appeared that no one else was in the room with them, but Harry remembered that some of the Death Eaters outside had possessed invisibility cloaks. He was prepared to tear this room down at the first sign of trouble.

"Come on," the man said happily from his armchair, reaching for a biscuit. "I assure you that I am the only one in this room besides you and your companions, Mr. Potter. Please, have a seat."

It was then that Harry really saw the man seated in the armchair, and for a moment the air caught in his lungs, and his eyes widened in surprise. He was looking at another dead man. He seemed a lot younger than the last time he had seen him, but that face was unmistakable. He was a pale man with straw-coloured hair.

It was Barty Crouch Jr.

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## Chapter 10 - War is a Game

*Part II: In which the pawns fall and the battle begins in earnest*

A lone figure stood atop of the fortress of Azkaban, surveying the powerful magical battle being fought on the hillside below him. The wind was howling in his ears and the first streams of sunlight rose over the distant horizon.

He watched Potter, battling his way up the hill. His power was impressive, unmatched, but he could tell the Dementors were effecting him. *One weakness that could be his undoing.* Destroying three Death Eaters with blasting curses, Potter turned and avoided half a dozen Killing curses, saving all three of their lives.

The sounds and shouts of battle reached his ears and his eyes reflected the flashing destruction of the curses. He saw James Potter and another man he wasn't familiar with, but they were defending against the Death Eater onslaught. The true power was coming from Harry Potter.

"Lestrangle," the teenage figure called harshly, and a black robed Death Eater ran across the roof towards him.

"Yes?" Bellatrix Lestrangle said, bowing.

"Bring our special guest to the roof, and inform Crouch we will soon be joined by three other guests, not just one. Tell him not to worry, and that the plan remains unchanged."

Bellatrix nodded and disappeared down the stairs back into the prison, all the while the figure never took his eyes off Harry, who had finished his duelling and was now interrogating a single Death Eater. Then he was walking up the hill towards the prison, showing no sign of weariness anymore, not even that brought on by the Dementors.

Eyes hidden underneath his hood, the lone figure turned away and headed back towards the centre of the roof, wand drawn. The next few hours would be very interesting.

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### *Twenty Minutes Later*

*It was then that Harry really saw the man seated in the armchair, and for a moment the air caught in his lungs, and his eyes widened in surprise. He was looking at another dead man. He seemed a lot younger than the last time he had seen him, but that face was unmistakable. He was a pale man with straw-coloured hair.*

*It was Barty Crouch Jr.*

Harry immediately pointed his wand between Crouch's eyes and scowled frighteningly. "Crouch..." he breathed.

"At your service," the Death Eater said, nodding mockingly. "Have a seat, gentlemen. Then we can move on to today's business."

"Where is Melissa?" James asked harshly, pushing forward passed Dermas and advancing on Barty Crouch.

"She remains unharmed... to a degree," Crouch smiled, and again motioned for them to sit.

"I think we should sit down, lads," Trask said, and then himself moved across the room and down into one of the three armchairs cautiously.

Harry and James were apprehensive for a moment, but then they did sit. "That's better," nodded Crouch, who seemed truly happy that they had chosen to sit. "Now, on to the matter at hand."

"What is this?" James asked, sickened. The man in front of him was calmly sipping his tea as if this were anywhere else on the planet.

"All will be explained in time, gentlemen," Crouch said, waving his hand. "Tea?"

"Get on with it, Crouch," Harry said harshly.

"If you insist..." Crouch hissed, no longer smiling. "Let me begin again. Gentlemen... Welcome to Azkaban. As you undoubtedly know the

sun has just risen today, Sunday the 9<sup>th</sup> of April, and I'm afraid that it may be the last time any of you see it rise."

"How dramatic..." Dermas whispered.

Crouch continued, showing no sign that he had heard him. "By now you have probably realised that Azkaban has been out of the Ministry's control for some time. As of right now, the Dark Lord is holding twenty one prisoners on this island, all of them sentenced to death for betraying their blood."

"Twenty one?" Harry frowned.

Crouch smiled again, and nibbled on one of the biscuits. "Two weeks ago I led a force of twenty one Aurors to secure this island. Sadly, none of them saw my ulterior motives until it was too late. One unfortunate soul, you no doubt saw at the entrance to the prison. He was the only one who put up any kind of fight, but none can withstand the might of the Dark Lord's arm indefinitely. The remaining twenty were captured and are now imprisoned throughout the fortress. Add them to your daughter, Mr. Potter," he finished, staring at James. "And that makes twenty one."

"Why are you telling us this?" Dermas asked, shaking his head.

"Because all of their lives," Crouch said, "are in your hands. Within the long and empty halls of this fortress roam seventy eight Dementors, fifty five Death Eaters and at least two dozen nasty wards and traps have been set. And within all of that are the souls of the twenty one innocent individuals, whose only crime so far has to have had too much trust in me and my intentions. They are all unarmed, all in separate cells, and they will all die unless they leave this island by sunset."

"And you want us to get them out?" James said. "You're helping us?"

Crouch laughed. "Oh no, no, no," he said. "Just think of everything you see and hear from now on as a game. I am merely here to relay the rules and stakes to you all. Those stakes being, of course, your lives and those of the innocent. Think of it as a very real game of chess."

"And if we refuse to play?" Harry said, itching to wipe the smirk of Crouch's face.

"Everyone dies now. The Death Eaters have been instructed to kill anyone outside of their cells and I can open them all with a keyword."

"Where is Melissa in all of this?" James asked.

Crouch shrugged. "At the Queen's side, a captive of the game."

"So..." Trask said. "Dementors, Death Eaters and God knows what else... and twenty one lives stuck in the middle. Why not just let them all go?"

Harry nodded. "I'll come quietly. Trade all of their lives, for mine."

Crouch merely laughed. "What fun would any game be if the innocent never suffered for everyone else's ambition?"

Anger flashed across Harry's face and he stood up quickly, his palm alight with magic. He pointed his hand directly at Crouch's forehead. "War is not a game, death... is not a game. Let them go unharmed or die yourself."

Crouch, unexpectedly, didn't even flinch. "Kill me and everyone dies. It's as simple as that. Fifty five Death Eaters, Potter, and only three of you. Tell me, how do you manage to sleep at night? The Dementors must affect you terribly, for all the life you so easily take..."

"Shut up," Harry whispered.

Crouch stood up himself now, and with a flick of his wand, vanished his chair and the table with the tea and biscuits. "Sadly, gentlemen, this will be the last time we meet. Azkaban will destroy you, and the lives of the twenty one bargaining chips. I have told you enough, this fortress is now a maze, full of traps and enemies. Should you survive, well... we'll see what happens then. Goodbye."

Harry, James and Dermal each had their hands firmly gripped around the long shafts of wood that were their wands. They all wanted to destroy Barty Crouch, but they knew they condemned

twenty one souls to death if they did. So they let him go. He disappeared up the only flight of stairs in the room, leaving the three of them alone again.

"Everything just got a whole lot more serious," James whispered. "What are we going to do?"

"We're going to think this through," Harry said, pacing over to the stairs and back, a frown of thought upon his forehead.

"I think it's fairly self-explanatory," Trask said, shaking his head. "If we go through with this, we're dead."

"And if we don't, twenty one good people will die, including Melissa," James sighed. "That's all I need to know, let's go."

"It's all about me though," Harry said. "Voldemort wants me dead. There's going to be more to it than Crouch told us. If this is a game, then one side will definitely be cheating."

"Chess...." Dermal whispered. "He said it was like chess."

"White always makes the first move in chess," James said. "I guess we're white."

Harry clicked his teeth thoughtfully. "You said Portkeys can work if they're created on the island?" he asked James, who nodded. "Trask, can you still make Portkeys?"

Dermal frowned. "What do you mean 'still' make? How did you know I could do that?"

"Long, long story. But I've got a plan. We can't leave this island without these twenty one people, and I'm willing to bet some of them will be near death. So, we'll head up Azkaban one level at a time, searching each floor, every cell for survivors. Trask, if you're able, make some Portkeys to transport them to St. Mungo's, and... and that's it. Let's go...."

"Pretty unpredictable plan..." Dermal couldn't help but say, as all three of them headed over to the stone stairs.



"You got a better one?"

Trask shrugged. "I was supposed to be going to breakfast this morning with this lovely young Muggle woman I met at the market last week. That was a fairly decent plan..."

Harry laughed harshly as he ascended the winding stairs, lit faintly by a few dim torches, casting just enough light to see by. They didn't ascend very high, and at the top was a single solitary black door, with a large cast-iron handle. James reached out with his free left hand to grasp this handle, and his fist closed around it tightly.

"Ah," he managed briefly, a split second before the handle erupted in a dozen separate spikes of iron metal, which pierced his hand in six different places. He cried out in pain as his hand began to bleed profusely.

"Jesus," Dermas said quickly, grabbing James's impaled hand and pulling it up and off the trapped handle, which returned to normal as soon as his flesh left it.

"Ow..." James whispered, holding his wounded hand out in front of him, pain etched into his features.

"Here," Harry said urgently, casting the few healing charms he knew over the blood-slicked hand. The half a dozen punctures sealed themselves sloppily, but the pain and bleeding subsided a fair bit, and James muttered his thanks.

"Right," Dermas said. "Nobody... touch... anything. Every time we head on to a new corridor we cast detection spells."

Harry nodded and then turned to face the black door. "*Reducto!*" he said gently, but there was enough force in it to disintegrate the door, not even leaving ash.

The three of them took a few short steps into the cold and poorly lit corridor of the first floor of Azkaban prison. It was damp and dark, and all around them the rattling breath of the Dementors had returned, full force and Harry swayed under its power.

*"Detus Nosum!"* Trask said, swinging his wand down and casting a large arc of light across the length of the room, thrusting it forward and sending it into the darkness ahead of them. It hit the far wall of this long, dark corridor and dispersed into nothing. "If there were any traps along here that would've highlighted them as red markings. It's safe."

Harry and James nodded but they still progressed with caution, staying close together as their eyes grew use to the dimness of the long corridor, which forked up ahead both left and right. "How many floors does Azkaban have?" Harry asked, trying to remember the number of windows he had counted from outside.

"I'd say about nineteen, maybe twenty," James shrugged. "But it has been magically expanded, so it could be hundreds."

"No it'll be around twenty," Trask said. "For convenience sake, and because there's about fifty cells on each floor, if memory serves, and that's been more than enough over the past couple of centuries."

"Damn..." breathed Harry. "We're going to have to check one thousand cells!?"

Trask nodded grimly. "And from the design of this thing, I think we can expect five rows of ten on each floor. We'll just have to go up and down each one, checking them for any Aurors."

"And Melissa," James said quietly, but Crouch's comment about her at the Queen's side was not forgotten, and Harry had grasped its meaning.

And they started, as most do, at the beginning. Harry, James and Dermas swept each floor for any signs of life, and every time they turned a corner, Dermas cast his detection spell to search for wards and traps. There were none, nor was there any one else on this floor. Each cell Harry blasted his way into was empty, devoid of life.

Another set of stairs led up in the far corner from where they had entered, and Harry began to understand the layout of Azkaban prison. He was willing to bet that they'd find the stairs to the floor above this new one, in the far corner from where they stood now. It was built so

they had to inspect every cell they passed, which, as Trask had said, was very convenient.

After Trask had sent his detection spell down the corridor - it was clear - the three of them began to check the cells. Five on each side of the corridor. Harry took the left as Dermas took the right. James was on lookout, he had to be if they were to believe that this fortress was infested with Death Eaters and Dementors. It didn't take long to find the first Auror.

"Over here," Harry said, looking through the bars on the wooden door of the fourth cell. With a flick of his wand, Harry wrenched the lock from the door, which swung open with a loud creak. Casting a quick detection spell, he walked into the cell slowly, and approached the huddled form in the far corner.

"Who's there?" breathed a voice in the darkness. It was harsh, cold, but fearful.

James, still on lookout, waited outside as Dermas entered the cell behind Harry - already working his magic on a galleon that Harry had just tossed him. Harry lit the tip of his wand and approached the figure, recognising her as an Auror from the white robes she was wearing, which were blood stained and covered in grime, but still unmistakable.

"Hello," he managed, kneeling down next to the woman. "My name's Harry."

The blonde haired Auror looked up tiredly, fearfully, and Harry knew instantly the signs of the Cruciatus curse. He could see it in her eyes. "Jenny..." she whispered, shaking as she struggled to sit up. "You... not a Death Eater?"

Harry shook his head as Dermas passed him the galleon Portkey. "Far from it," he said, and she smiled for the first time in two weeks. "Here. This is a Portkey to St. Mungo's." He took her shaking hand and placed the coin in her palm, closing her fingers around it. She was too weak to do much more.

"He said we were going to die..." she rasped.

"Who said that?" Harry asked, but she had begun to cry. Whether from the fear or joy of being rescued he didn't know, but enough was enough.

"Listen, Jenny," Harry said quickly. "Tell the Healers to expect a lot more Aurors to be coming their way soon. We're going to get you all out of here. You understand?"

Jenny looked up at him with glazed eyes, but she wasn't an Auror for nothing. She nodded resolutely and then, with a nod from Harry, Dermas activated the Portkey. "*Activate*," he said, his wand pointed at her closed fist. She shimmered away to nothing, leaving no sign that she had ever been there at all.

"She was in a bad way," James said as Dermas and Harry exited the cell.

Harry sighed. "I just hope we find them all alive. From the look of that cell I'd say they've been fed - although not well. And she had been tortured. I think it's going to get worse as we get higher-

*"AVADA KEDAVRA!"*

Faster than any of them thought humanly possible, Harry tackled James and Dermas hard back into the cell they had just exited from, as the corridor they were standing in a fraction of a second ago was bathed in green light. There was an explosion of rock and dust as the Killing curse impacted against the far wall at the other end of the corridor, and then silence.

Harry was already back on his feet a moment after he'd landed hard on James's legs. Wand drawn and palm glowing, he ran from the cell to face whatever had attacked them. He saw them and calculated his chances instantly.

Six Death Eaters, at the end of the corridor where it turned left onto another one, and another row of cells. They were about twenty feet away, and Harry instantly began throwing a barrage of blasting curses, bone breaking hexes, and stunning spells. The once dark and damp stone corridor was now alight with magic. Reds melded into blues and greens as Harry deflected some dark magic into the walls,

shattering the stone and sending small splinters of rock up and down the corridor.

Two Death Eaters fell under Harry's first assault, one with his neck snapped, and another blown to pieces under the power of a blasting curse. A severing charm, aimed at Harry's throat, just grazed his neck as the magic flew past him. The cut wasn't that deep, but it began to bleed profusely from the clean split veins. He staggered back as his warm blood flowed down his neck and chest, soaking his black shirt.

"*Vestic!*" he cried, taking another life and lowering the Death Eaters number to three.

James and Dermas had managed to join the fight at this point, and the three remaining Death Eaters didn't last long after Harry sent a stream of bright red stunning magic, that left sparks of red in the air behind it as it pounded into the chest of the nearest cloaked Death Eater. The shockwave from this impact knocked out one of the final two men, and the final Death Eater turned and fled - knowing his chances were next to nothing.

All was silent again and the corridor was smoking with the force of all the magic that had just zigzagged across it amazingly. Harry sighed and took a deep breath, just fully realising the pain in his neck was bitterly stinging.

"Damn..." breathed James, inspecting the wound in his wand light. "They hit a vein. Can you heal it?"

Harry nodded, placing his palm across the left side of his neck. Remembering the few healing spells he had ever learnt back in his original world, with his spell trainer, Grace Arnair. He wondered briefly what she was doing now, in another reality. He didn't even know if she had survived that final battle at Hogsmeade and the Forbidden Forest. He recalled a skin stitching charm, that rejoined skin - different from the one he had used on James earlier.

"*Consanescio Sanescere Sanui!*" Harry whispered the charm and his entire neck glowed blue for a moment, and he winced as he felt his skin tightening and rejoining. But it was only a moment's pain, and nothing to him really.

"I doubt Madam Pomfrey could have done better," James said, inspecting the wound again. "It left a long white line of new skin."

"Let's keep going," Harry said.

They found another Auror on that floor, near death in his cell on the fourth corridor of the second floor. He didn't respond to them but was breathing shallowly, so James coughed up a galleon this time, and the man was portkeyed to safety. The third floor was empty, but the rattled breath of the Dementors was steadily increasing, and Harry was sure they were only a few floors up - if that.

The three tired fighters - James and Harry not having slept in nearly twenty four hours - pushed open the door to the fourth floor of Azkaban prison, and Harry suddenly felt a nauseating cramp in his stomach. He blanched and then stumbled, but Dermas caught him under one arm and raised him to his feet.

"We're not alone on this floor," he managed. "Dementors..."

James's eyes darkened and he took the lead, in front of Harry as Dermas brought up the rear. The first corridor was darker than all the previous others they had been in, having now checked one hundred of the possible one thousand cells, and finding only two Aurors so far - with no sign of Melissa. They progressed cautiously, the rattling sound of the Dementor's breath growing in their ears and pounding in their heads.

The first ten cells on the first corridor were ominously empty. As they turned onto the second corridor, Trask cast his detection spells and found the hallway clear. James took the left side this time as Harry took the right, Dermas keeping guard in the middle. The floor here was wet with running water from somewhere, and it was slippery. The first three cells were empty, but then Harry came across the third Auror of twenty.

"James, Dermas," he said, once again wrenching the lock from the door.

James turned from the cell he was just about to inspect, and walked across the hallway to Harry as the cell door swung open quietly.

Harry stumbled again as he entered the cell, frowning and pushing the screams of his mother to the back of his mind. Had he not been affected by the Dementors so severely, he would have known that at least half a dozen Dementors were only a stone's throw away. Dermal was on guard though, and he was the first to spot them in the darkness.

"HA!" he said urgently. "JAMES! HARRY!"

Harry was in the centre of the cell with the Auror, who was struggling to speak now that Harry looked at him. He seemed vaguely familiar, but in the darkness Harry couldn't see him properly. He could, however, see his mouth. It was opening and closing urgently, and the man was becoming more alert. Harry frowned at him, barely hearing or understanding Dermal's cries as something in his mind clicked.

*CRACK!*

Something heavy hit Harry in the back hard, cracking two of his ribs and sending him sprawling onto the cell floor. His current situation instantly confirming his thoughts of a moment ago. The Auror had been silenced, because they weren't alone in the cell. Sure enough, Harry cried out in pain as a steel tipped boot was thrust into his stomach, driving the air from his lungs and bringing tears of pain to his eyes.

He hadn't dropped his wand yet, and he rolled over quickly - thinking only of survival, he still had way too much work to do across two worlds to die now. Struggling to breathe through the pain of his broken ribs, he dazedly made out the figures of two men in the cell, who had just thrown invisibility cloaks to the floor.

One of them kicked at Harry's hand again, and sent his wand spiralling up into the air and away to the far corner of the cell. Harry couldn't care less though, and his palms reflected this feeling as they glowed in response to his anger and pain. He wasn't quick enough though, and a bone breaking curse hit him in his left wrist, shattering the bone and making that hand useless. He couldn't believe it. The pain was immense, and just when Harry thought he had run his race, the chest of the man standing over him triumphantly, wand pointed

and glowing between his eyes, exploded in a rush of blood, bone and flesh.

Harry, still struggling to breathe, sighed with relief as he saw the silvery point of Dernas' sword sticking out through the man's chest. He died instantly, but the other Death Eater in the cell acted quickly, and threw himself at Dernas, wrenching his sword from his hand as the impaled Death Eater fell to the floor. Dernas and the masked Death Eater hit the wall hard, and Harry felt the impact in the floor around him.

Dernas hit the wall and his nose was cracked viciously, blood gushing down his face and onto his robes. He was only stunned for a moment though, and calling on the skills he had had when he was an Auror, he thrust his elbow hard into the gut of the man holding him. The Death Eater grunted and his grip relaxed, giving Trask the opening he needed.

In a blur, he spun in the man's loose arms, and curled his hand into a fist before crashing it into the Death Eaters masked face. The mask - which was made of rubber - offered little to no protection from the blow. Repaying the favour, Dernas broke the man's nose and he staggered back.

Harry threw his leg forward and tripped the man up. He stumbled over Harry's leg, arms flailing about widely and fell against the wall of the cell, hitting his head sickeningly. He didn't get back up. Coughing, Harry struggled to sit up but the pain in his chest crippled him and the Dementors were now upon them.

James watched Dernas jump back into the cell to help Harry, and then turned to face the six Dementor's gliding his way. He shivered in misery and his wand hand shook as the hideous soul sucking creatures approached. Steeling himself, pushing the pain as far back as he could, James concentrated on his Patronus.

*"EXPECT-"*

The cell door to his left sprung open suddenly and unexpectedly. It was the cell he had been about to check before Harry had called him over to his cell. A masked Death Eater sprang from it and quickly



fired a death curse at James. Using his instincts, James fell over his own feet purposely and landed on his back, the purple light of the Vestic curse sailing past him and hitting a portion of the wall near the cell where Dermas battled with a Death Eater.

Spinning on his back, James pointed his wand at the man and sent a fireball at him. "*Incendio Aduro!*" It caught and the Death Eaters robes erupted in orange flame and he screamed in pain. Those flames were searing hot. Pain blocked all his other senses, and he ran wildly down the corridor, and into the waiting arms of the Dementors - now only ten feet away.

James tried to summon his patronus, but his mind was screaming pain at him. With the last of his strength, he rolled across the wet floor and into the cell that held Harry and Dermas - crawling just inside the door.

Harry was blind with the horror of the Dementors. He heard his parents, his true parents, dying continuously over and over again. Voldemort's cold dead laughter... Ethan Rafe dying in Abingdon... Memories of the Chamber... Sirius dying... Dozens of slaughtered men and women in both attacks on Hogsmeade... Diagon Alley massacre. He was no longer capable of summoning a happy thought, and had he been aware of it - he would have known he was screaming.

Dermas cringed and fumbled for his wand as the first Dementor entered the cell, which now held James, Harry, the unknown Auror, two corpses, and himself. His vision blurred as he was forced to recall the day his fiancé had died at the hands of Voldemort. Dreaded certainty flooded over him, as he knew this was the end. What was he thinking challenging the power of Voldemort on Azkaban? Did he really expect to live?

James was the first in the Dementor's path, and he nearly fainted as two cold and clammy decaying hands wrapped themselves around his throat and pulled him up to the rattling mouth hidden beneath the hood of the lead Dementor. Strangely, as living death was so near, James had the strangest thought; *Harry wasn't wearing white robes,*

he thought and then he was mere millimetres away from the rotten flesh of the Dementor's face.

*"EXPECTO PATRONUM!"*

Harry's mind cleared slightly as a faint white shield forced the Dementors from the cell. He was still lying on the floor, his memories having only retreated faintly. Standing above him though, was the last person Harry would have ever thought he'd see.

The Auror, the man who had been silenced so as to not alert Harry and the others to the plot on their lives, was no longer silenced. Through fate or just plain good luck the spell had worn off just as James was being lifted to his death by the Dementor. He grasped the wand that had hit him earlier - the one that the young man had been wielding when he entered his cell - and stood up strongly, casting the patronus charm.

Two weeks of pain had taken their toll though, and he could only manage a faint mist, which was just enough to drive the Dementors from the cell. It was enough to save all of their lives.

Harry struggled to stand and, for getting everything else for a moment, concentrated on what brief time they had, in thinking of a happy thought. His mind was clouded with the power of the Dementors, and the pain all over his body was crippling, but he knew this was either life or death. Having been expecting Dementors, Harry had thought of a really happy thought that morning - as they approached Azkaban from the sea.

*It was, of course, Ginny.*

*'EXPECTO PATRONUM!'* he bellowed, raising his right wrist and facing his palm forward. Prongs erupted from his palm in a wave of bright silvery light and immediately flew through the door, tearing at the Dementors who were now shrieking as they were repelled, disappearing back into the darkness.

Harry was breathing heavily now that the Dementors' effects had been lessened enough, and James and Sirius were getting back to

their feet. He turned to face the Auror that had saved them, and knew he hadn't been mistaken in this man's identity a moment ago.

"Thanks..." Harry said, as the Auror leaned against the wall. He didn't look well, but he seemed to be in the best condition so far of the three Aurors they had found.

"It's okay..." he managed, and sagged further against the wall.

Dermas was wiping the blood from his nose and sheathing his sword as James stood and walked over to Harry. Holding his broken wrist close against his side, Harry struggled to remember any healing spells he knew about broken bones. He couldn't think of anything though, and sighed in defeat.

"Well I think it safe to say we just got the shit kicked out of us," Dermas said, picking up one of the many splinters of rock around the cell and working the Portkey magic on it.

"We're gonna get you a Portkey out of here," James said, approaching the Auror and then recognising him as well. "Cedric Diggory! Jesus, I never knew you became an Auror."

"Professor Potter," Cedric said, nodding to his old teacher. "Completed the training five months ago."

"I thought you wanted to study dragons...."

Cedric shrugged and glanced at Harry. "Changed my mind when my parents were killed by the Lestranges."

"Here we go," said Dermas, offering the Portkey. "This'll take you to St. Mungo's."

Cedric hesitated and Harry saw him do it. "Do you know how many Aurors are here?" he asked.

"Including you," Harry replied, talking to someone his mind screamed at him was dead. "Eighteen."

Cedric nodded. "I wanna stay then. I can fight... I'll come with you."

"You're in no condition to," James frowned. "Take the Portkey."

"How many came with you?" Cedric asked.

Dermas laughed hollowly. "We're the first, last and only wave," he said.

"Just the three of you!?" Cedric exclaimed.

"Let's just go," Harry said suddenly. "If he wants to come, let him. We could use the help."

Harry began to limp towards the door of the cell, stepping over the body of one of the Death Eaters. Dermas, James and Cedric followed him out into the corridor. It was deserted again, and the only sign that a battle had just been fought here was the three bodies of the Death Eaters - two in the cell and the third one smouldering in a heap further down the hall.

"Here's your wand," Cedric said, offering it to Harry.

Harry shook his head. "You use it. I can work magic without it."

Cedric Diggory frowned, but he wasn't about to argue, and held the wand in front of him expertly, his eyes - already accustomed to the darkness of Azkaban - scanned the corridor ahead of them unblinkingly. He was tired, he was weak, and he was hungry - but he was also an Auror, and as of right now that was all that mattered to him.

"We all okay?" Dermas asked, casting a few healing spells against his nose. It was only enough to stop the bleeding.

James sighed. "Ask us again in half an hour."

A lot worse for the wear, and still having only rescued three of the twenty one innocent souls on the island, Harry stumbled on down the corridor next to James and behind Cedric. His thoughts were not on the pain in his chest and wrist, but on that godforsaken graveyard where he had seen Cedric Diggory die. Seeing him alive again brought back a lot of painful memories.

It didn't take the four fighters long to find the next Auror, but this time they were careful in checking the cell. It was on the last corridor of the fourth floor, and the woman was wide eyed and terrified huddled in a corner as Harry blew the lock of her cell door with his wandless magic. Ignoring her for the moment, Harry quickly sent stunning spells into the other corners of the room, but they dissipated harmlessly on the stone of the prison.

"Are you alone?" he asked the woman, who nodded frightfully. "Trask-"

"Right here," Dernas said, and passed Harry the lock he had just wrenched from the door.

"Portkey," he told the woman, and five seconds later she had been transported to the safety of St. Mungo's.

The fifth floor of the island prison was utterly deserted and deceptively quiet. It threatened to lure them all into a false sense of peace, but the constant throbbing of Harry's wrist was enough of a reminder that death stalked these dark halls mercilessly. As was the routine, Trask - and now Cedric - cast detection spells for magical traps and wards. They moved through this floor without incident and reached the sixth floor, and another battle.

"Does the Ministry know you're here?" Cedric asked James as they walked down the first corridor of the sixth floor.

James shook his head. "They don't even know Azkaban has fallen. Harry, Dernas and I came alone."

Cedric looked troubled. "What did you think you could achieve? How did you even know we were imprisoned here?"

"My daughter, Melissa," James said sharply, "is here somewhere. It's a long story, but Voldemort wants Harry dead, and they took Melissa to draw him here - into this game. They've underestimated him though."

"How so?" he asked, as Harry wrenched the lock from another cell.

James turned to stare into Cedric's eyes, so he would see the truth in his. "Voldemort fears Harry, because Harry can and will kill him. He's stronger, smarter, and faster than Voldemort."

Cedric saw the truth in James' eyes, but his reason and common sense gave him doubt. "His wandless magic is impressive...."

Harry and Trask emerged from the cell, both looking slightly pale. Harry was holding his broken wrist close to his body and his breath was sharp and quick. "Wasn't pretty," Trask said at James' quizzical look. He wouldn't say more than that.

"That's four," Harry whispered.

Unexpectedly, they found another three Aurors within the first four corridors of that floor. All of them in a bad way, but all of them alive and unguarded. It was, again, deceptively quiet. Although Harry was more than prepared for anything the Death Eaters could throw at him. He was even prepared, perhaps even anxious, to face the Dementors - and get them out of this fight. Prongs (it felt strange to call his patronus that with James walking next to him) had sprung forth from his with nothing more than a brief happy thought. Harry knew that he may even manage two equal patronuses using the force of his rising power levels.

They turned onto the fifth and final corridor of the sixth floor of the prison, and Harry once again felt the nervous, nauseating feeling of anticipation and pain in his stomach. They weren't alone in this corridor. With his hand he motioned for the others to stop walking, and they did so silently.

*"Stupefy! Stupefy! Stupefy!"* he said suddenly, three equal bursts of hot red magic erupting from his white glowing palm and streaming down the corridor faster even than Cedric's eyes could follow. Harry didn't stop there, not even waiting to see if his stunning spells connected with anything or anyone - he raised his palm again and with a series of incantations and thought magic, wrenched four of the prison cell doors from their frames and levitated them as a wall of steel and wood down the corridor.

*"Avada Kedavra!"*

One of the doors exploded in green flame, sharp splinters cutting up and down the corridor, but the wall made out of doors was moving too quickly for the Death Eaters. Two thumps were heard and then the clatter of metal against stone as the doors collided with the stairs and far wall at the far end of the dark corridor. No spells were cast back in their direction, and Dermal quickly performed his detection spell.

For the first time in six floors, a large patch of the damp floor began to glow dark red as the wave of detection magic passed over it and Dermal sucked in his breath sharply. Checking the first four cells as they hurried by them, Harry, James, Trask and Cedric approached the glowing patch of floor and frowned.

"What is it?" Harry asked.

They all shook their heads. "Impossible to tell unless it's activated," Cedric said. "Could be anything.... Walk around it, stay clear of the red."

"Most likely it's a medium level curse field," James said, keeping his eyes strained ahead into the darkness for signs of movement. There was nothing and no one all the way up to the stairs that led to the seventh floor, except, of course, for three crumpled bodies of which only one was still alive, but stunned.

"A curse - something like the bone breaking hex - that remains inactive on the patch of ground its cast over," James continued. "It will have a perimeter for activation, and if you trip it you'll be cursed. It could be anything, although it does take a large amount of power to create them and most can't even manage to create one using the stunning spell."

"You think it was Voldemort?" asked Trask.

"Seems to small for him," Harry said quietly, walking up the steps quickly and blasting the black door away - in case it was charmed or cursed.

"A few of the bad eggs in his inner circle could probably mange it..." Cedric said uncertainly.

"We'll just have to watch out for more," Harry said as Trask cast his detection spell down the corridor.

The seventh floor was a lot like the fifth, inasmuch as it was empty. No Aurors, Death Eaters, Dementors, or magical mines were to be found anywhere upon it. On the eighth floor they found two more Aurors, one almost in as good health as Cedric, but his leg was broken and they portkeyed him away. Another female Auror was unconscious and she would wake up in St. Mungo's in two days with a slight headache.

"That was Auror number nine," Trask said as they exited the dark cell. "Eleven to go, and your daughter James."

"I think she'll be on the topmost floor," James said thoughtfully. "A captive at the Queen's side."

"The Queen?" whispered Cedric.

"Voldemort's son," Harry said. "His second in command. Used a lot more than the King, though not quite as powerful."

"That kid's just as evil as Voldemort," Trask said harshly. "But he knows a lot of dark magic."

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10:14am

Headmaster's

Office

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

"Only one of them was coherent enough to talk to us, Albus," Remus said quickly from his position in the fire. "An Auror with a broken leg - man named Grayson. Assigned to the Azkaban protection detail under Crouch Jr. two weeks ago."

"What did he have to say?" Dumbledore asked quickly, staring into the fiery eyes of Remus Lupin as his head moved in the fire.



"He said a bloke that looked a lot like James Potter just gave him a Portkey off of Azkaban Island. He was a prisoner, Albus, but not the Ministry's."

Right then was one of the rare moments in life when surprise could be seen on Albus Dumbledore's face. "Azkaban!?" he whispered. "They went to Azkaban..."

"From the looks of things they're getting everyone off that island," Remus continued. "Here at St. Mungo's a new Auror comes in about every ten minutes, clutching something that was turned into a Portkey. Most of them are near death... Healers aren't hopeful for a couple of them."

"James and Harry are alone on Azkaban," Dumbledore said. "Melissa Potter must be there as well."

"There was a breach of the wards three hours ago," Remus said. "Something punched through the outer ring of protection surrounding the island. A squad was just about to be dispatched to investigate when the first Aurors began to arrive at St. Mungo's."

"I am not entirely sure how they made it onto the island, but we should send aid as soon as possible, Remus. Aurors and- yes... I will go as well." Dumbledore stood up in his chair as Remus' head disappeared from within the fire. He grabbed a handful of floo powder and soon stood in the fireplace at St. Mungo's.

He and Remus shook hands as he stepped clear of the fireplace. "How many Aurors were on that island, Remus?" he asked as the two of them began to walk impressively down the white corridor.

"Twenty two, led by Crouch," Remus said quickly. "We've been receiving his progress reports for the last two weeks and he said everything was fine, so we have to assume he's turned."

"Harry said as much yesterday morning..." Dumbledore whispered.

Remus led Dumbledore through the collection of clean white corridors and up several flights of stairs to the observation ward. Five minutes

and they approached the Auror named Grayson, who was sitting up in bed tiredly - his leg bandaged and a Healer feeding him potions.

He smiled as Dumbledore came up alongside him and the headmaster recalled that this man had attended Hogwarts fifteen years ago. "Hello, Mr. Grayson," Dumbledore said. "Please, tell me what you know."

"Hello, Professor," he said. "Not much to tell I'm afraid. I've got people telling me here that a boy named Harry Potter was the one who portkeyed me here. But I thought Harry Potter was dead?"

"A lot has happened over the last two weeks," Dumbledore said. "Harry Potter is alive. Was he alone?"

Grayson shook his head. "Another man was there-"

"James-" began Remus.

"It wasn't James Potter. I'd know him if it was, because James was my instructor back at the division. No... this man had a wiry beard and was missing a few teeth. He carried a sword. It was him who made the Portkey, out of my shoe."

Dumbledore turned to Remus and in unison they said, "Dermas Trask."

"We have to get to that island, Remus," Dumbledore then said and then both of them Apparated into the Auror offices at the Ministry.

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"How did you get those scars on your cheek?" Trask asked Harry as the four of them ascended onto the tenth floor of Azkaban prison. They had rescued ten Aurors so far and taken out another four Death Eaters on the ninth floor. The tenth seemed deserted so far.

Harry unconsciously raised a hand to his cheek and felt the rough lines of the jagged pieces of his healed flesh. "A Death Eater attack in Abingdon," he said, having to actually think back through all of his fights since then to pinpoint the moment this had happened. "I was hit

in the face by a tonne of shrapnel, and didn't get it treated magically for a few days. Left a few scars."

Trask nodded. "You had to think hard about that one," he stated.

Harry clicked his teeth and looked thoughtfully ahead of himself into the darkness. "A lot has happened since then," he said. "Like ending up in this place...." Harry didn't mean Azkaban - he meant this world. Trask picked up on that.

"What do you mean?" he asked, examining a cell.

Shaking his head, Harry said, "Never mind."

"Another one of your long stories...?"

"Something like that," Harry shrugged, looking into another cell. "There's someone in here."

Deramas had made three Portkeys on his way along the corridors of the ninth floor, and handed one to Harry now. Half a minute later and they were on their way again, just as Harry felt another uneasy stab of pain in his stomach, and his head began to cloud with painful memories.

"Dementors," both he and Cedric said, one after the other.

It didn't seem possible, but the corridor around them grew even darker, and the faint light the small torches on the walls gave out was diminished as a wave of unrelenting cold washed over the four tired men.

Not wanting a repeat of what had happened last time, the four of them huddled together closely, standing back to back. Harry against Deramas and James against Cedric, all of them staring down to their end of the corridor - as they stood roughly halfway down the dark tunnel anyway. The reason for this was the suckling, rattled breath of the Dementors was coming from all around them, and from within their own minds.

The evil creatures seemed to be everywhere, and yet they couldn't be seen anywhere. Harry clutched his chest painfully with his good right hand as it felt someone had driven a spike of ice through his chest and into his beating heart. He shook it away after a few moments though, and raised his right palm defiantly against the cold.

*"Expecto Patronum!"* he cried, thinking of Ginny. His voice sounded no more than a desperate whisper on the wind as all of them had their own demons screaming within their minds, but if they had been able to hear properly, they would have heard Harry absolutely bellow the incantation.

White light swirled up and down his palm and small silver sparks erupted around and through his hand, emerging from the back of his hand. He could see his blood as a red light reflected on his skin from this surge of power and then, springing from his fingertips as well as his palm, a massive and impressive stag burst with all the force of his happiness and power and lit up the corridor with a light that had refused to be extinguished in all of Harry's sixteen and a half years spent in one world, and the few weeks he had spent in this one.

The pain in his heart disappeared instantly, like a splinter had been removed and replaced with soothing warmth. The stag, Prongs, took form silently and faint sparks of silver fell off him like small stars that vanished as they were absorbed into the floor. Prongs the silver stag charged down the hall and his light shed on the approaching Dementors - at least a dozen of them all crowded in the hallway.

Having faced Dementors so many times in his short life spent in the magical world - only six years Harry had to remind himself sometimes - he didn't even flinch as Prongs tore into the dozen hideous creatures and repelled them fiercely. Harry watched as another Patronus - a griffin he recognised as his Animagus form - joined Prongs and together the two patroni sent the beasts back into the darkness, where they disappeared to wherever it was when this happened.

Had Harry looked behind himself at that moment, he would have seen a silver fox and a large badger tearing into the lines of another dozen Dementors that had somehow managed to approach from

behind. For a few more brief moments the entire corridor was alight in such a way as it hadn't been for centuries, with the silver glow of warmth from the four patroni.

But then it was gone.

With the Dementors having retreated into the darkness from where they were born, the four silvery patroni converged about their creators and then flashed out of existence - leaving behind a shower of silver sparks that lit the corridor for a final time.

"Well that was magical," Trask said, walking over to a nearby cell and checking it for signs of life, sweeping his wand light in an arc from one corner to the other. It was empty.

"I'd say we're about halfway there now," Harry whispered, holding his swelling wrist close to his side. It was really throbbing now, and the bruising was fast becoming extensive.

"Halfway there to what?" asked James.

"To whatever end is waiting for us at the top of this fortress... Melissa... another battle..." he mumbled. *Ethan*, he thought and kept it to himself.

"If Crouch is to be believed," Dermas said as they walked onto a new corridor. "Then there are still at least forty Death Eaters and Dementors roaming in these halls."

"Not much chance of seeing this through then," Cedric said, but without fear. He was the weakest of the group - having spent two weeks in the cells of Azkaban, but he could hold his own if pushed. He had the strength of youth, as well as the ignorance. He refused to be beaten.

Trask laughed harshly as Harry spoke. "It doesn't look like we're getting out of this one," Harry said, in a tone that suggested humour but was, at the same time, deadly serious. "So if we're going to go down, I, for one, want to go down swinging."

"Now that is a creed to live by," Dernas said, touching his broken nose tenderly.

One Auror was to be found in the last cell on the tenth floor of Azkaban, and she was portkeyed away to safety without incident. Walking up the now familiar stairs to the eleventh floor, Cedric slipped and almost fell as the stone was damp and slick with grime. Thankfully, he kept his footing as Harry blasted away another door from the top of the stairs.

*"Avada Kedavra!"*

It was the grime and slick stone that saved Harry's life this time, as his eyes widened as the green light of death shot towards in the instant he tore the door away. In the small time between seconds in which the mind could think, Harry's screamed at him to move, and just as the curse was upon him, his legs gave a sudden jerk and he lost his footing on the top slippery stone.

Harry fell, in a graceful arc, and the curse missed the bridge of his nose by a quarter of an inch. The green light ran along the length of his body as he fell, almost brushing his chin as his head fell back. James watched it all in what seemed like slow motion. He felt he had enough time to study every angle of Harry's fall as the curse came within millimetres of his chest and face. But then he hit the stone hard, and the green curse of death smacked into the wall of the spiral stairs, above James, Dernas and Cedric.

All three of them shielded their eyes as the wall exploded deafeningly above them, dust and sharp stone splinters raining down upon them and cutting any exposed flesh on their arms. It tore open their robes and nicked skin beneath them on each of their chests and legs. Cedric saw stars as a blunt but rather large piece hit him above his ear.

A few dangerous feet above them however, Harry was once again fighting for his life. Having landed hard on his already broken wrist, Harry knew nothing but pain as the curse exploded above him. But his inborn reflexes and battle hardened mind and soul kicked in a nanosecond later, and his palm glowed strongly as he sprang back to

his feet - only mindful to keep his footing steady on the slippery stone stairs.

The curse was already out of his mouth no sooner than having thought of it. "*Vestit*," he said in a blur that was almost indecipherable. Magic knew what to do though, and purple light erupted from Harry's palm and flew like a sharp lightning bolt up and through the shallow frame of the broken door. He saw a Death Eater standing in the doorway, probably a man who was sure his Killing curse had ended Harry's life, but his curse travelled so fast that it didn't even register in the Death Eaters mind what had happened.

He was dead before he hit the floor.

"*Cusindeo!*" came the rough harsh voice from above them all, but James had already leapt up the stairs to Harry's side.

"*Protego!*" he cried. The bone breaking hex rang against the shield charm and was deflected back upon the caster, who only just managed a shield of his own - before turning and taking to his heels.

Harry coughed and winced in pain, leaning against the frame of the door. He was beyond tired now, sleep was just a faint longing, and his mind was focused solely and getting those around him who showed him such loyalty out of here alive. He wondered briefly what he had ever done to deserve such loyalty, because his sluggish mind could think of nothing. He yawned and walked through the door silently.

"I'm getting mighty tired of this," Dermas said, holding a piece of his tattered robes to the wound above Cedric's left ear. "You okay, kid?"

"Just a scratch," Cedric said, shrugging and taking the cloth in his own hand before following Harry up and through the broken door.

"Let's have a look at that," Harry whispered, and placed his hand on the bloody tangled hair above Cedric's ear. "*Sanescere Sanui.*" The skin healed itself inexpertly, as these types of spells were always almost more art than actual skill. Madam Pomfrey could have done it in an instant, leaving nothing to show that it had ever been there.

Harry had stopped the bleeding, but a scar would be left under Cedric's hair that he would carry for life.

*Azkaban, Eleventh floor*, Harry thought tiredly after Dermal had cast his detection spells and found another one of those floor 'mines'. All four of them avoided it without difficulty, and continued on down the dark halls resolutely, searching every cell they came across. Floor eleven was empty, again of anything; allies and enemies alike. They approached the staircase that led to the twelfth floor stoically, having now checked over five hundred (more than half) of the cells, and finding only eleven of them occupied.

None of them had any idea of the time, as none of them were wearing a watch. For all they knew, as Azkaban's darkness had taken away time's meaning, hours or days could have passed since they walked into this castle. Harry knew it was most likely hours, but the strain on all of them both mentally and physically played tricks with their senses. All of them kept going because of the goal of the game: *To survive.*

Dermal Trask was the most aware of the group, although he did have a bit of a hangover after spending most of the last night in the local pub with his Muggle friends, but Harry and James hadn't slept in over twenty four hours and Cedric had been trapped within these accursed walls without seeing sunlight for weeks.

The Death Eaters, on the other hand, were in ample fresh supply. And as Harry and his companions tired, the enemy grew anxious with anticipation, each and everyone of them wanting to kill the Potter boy and please their Dark Lord. Harry had also begun to guess that they were walking into a trap.

Well really there was no guessing about it. He knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that they would probably only run into a dozen or so more Death Eaters within the confines of these symmetrical floors, and that the true force would be waiting for them on the roof. *What then?* he thought. Voldemort could be there, dozens of Death Eaters, Dementors. Was he leading his companions to their deaths? Obliging the Death Eaters by walking right into their waiting arms....



Harry thought they might be, as did the others. But none of them voiced their opinions as Azkaban was already dark enough. He glanced to his left and saw Cedric Diggory, grown into a man that Harry should never have known. He shook his head, Cedric was just one more life his defiance and morality had claimed back in his own world, and yet here he was doing it all again...

*Why?*

Harry took another quick look at his friends, his father. These men were ready to die for him, willing to sacrifice their *lives*, in the end all that anyone had, to follow him and fight by his side.

*Why?*

What inspired them to follow him, to Azkaban prison of all places? James had trusted him on nothing more than his word when he had said that he could beat this fortress, and now here they were, halfway between sunlight and death and whatever lay beyond. Harry frowned and took the deepest breath he could with his broken ribs.

*They follow me because I've never quit*, he thought, and thinking back he couldn't recall a time he had simply given up. And he quit trying to find one because he knew one didn't exist. His life was too dangerous, and if he had given up at one point, he would have been dead a long time ago.

"There's a man in this cell," James said as they neared the second corridor on the twelfth floor.

Harry turned and nodded wearily to James, who he could just make out dimly in the torchlight of the hall. With a flick of his wrist the lock was wrenched from the door and it swung open aching on its hinges, another barrier unable to stand long against Harry's strength.

*That's another reason*, Harry thought as Trask went in to Portkey the Auror out. *They follow me because I'm the only one they can follow, except for maybe Dumbledore. I have the strength to do this, and maybe that's why I have this power... because I should.* There were many levels to his strength though, and Harry knew it was more than

just physical or magical strength. It was at most times deeper than that, and it could rarely be defined.

He had fallen and failed many times over the long years. Sirius' death was just one example. And his strength had grown from these failures; his pure magic had grown through circumstance and trial. He had strength through suffering, a power stronger than anything any world had ever known. But, again, his true strength was deeper than that...

*After all*, thought Harry. His greatest strength didn't come from never falling, as he had fallen and failed many people in his short life, but the fact that he had managed to get back up after ever fall was where his strength really lied.

It was at these moments that those who followed Harry received a glimpse of some monumental strength that only he truly possessed... that can, at desperate times, change the fate of more than one world.

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## Chapter 11 - In Which Good Men Die

*Part* *III:*  
*Through all the cunning and sly*  
*moves, it has become clear that*  
*the playing pieces possess souls*

*Auror* *Division*  
*Ministry* *Magic*  
*10:27am* *of*

"Shacklebolt!" Remus called down into the far end of the Auror cubicles. "Assemble squads three through seven in full battle wear in five minutes. Tonks, brooms and Portkeys for forty five men."

Remus swept commandingly down the passage between cubicles in the Auror division at the Ministry. Dumbledore walked silently at his side, both recognising the need for haste.

"Portkeys keyed to where?" Tonks asked quickly, her hair changing black subconsciously as she recognised the seriousness of the situation.

"To the port island town of Tiree out on the west Scottish coast," Dumbledore said next to Lupin. "Please be quick, Nymphadora."

Tonks nodded and used a nearby floo hub to floo to the magical transportation department to have the voice activated Portkeys created. It would take her about twenty minutes.

"They've been on that island at least four hours," Remus said quietly to Dumbledore, as he took down a pair of Azkaban blueprints from the wall and laid it out on the table in front of them. "The Dementors should have overpowered them."

Dumbledore studied the magical documents for a moment before responding. "Perhaps there are not as many on the island as we think," he mused.

"Or they've been kissed in that time," Remus said, but instantly knew he was wrong. "No... the Aurors were still coming in to St. Mungo's when we left a moment ago."

"Which is all the hope we have at the moment," Dumbledore said, "that any of them are alive."

Remus nodded slowly as the Auror division buzzed around them with an anxious anticipation. "Broom flight from Tیره puts our estimated time of arrival at... four hours from now," he said carefully, calculating it in his quick mind. "Near one o'clock."

"A lot can happen in four hours..."

Remus fell silent and, after giving them another quick glance and committing to memory all the important details, returned the Azkaban designs to the large shelf of documents attached to the wall. He took a deep breath, and turned back to Dumbledore. "Who is this boy, Albus?" he asked after a moment. "Is he arrogant enough to think he can take Azkaban alone?"

Dumbledore smiled gently. "No, Remus... it isn't arrogance. This boy, this other Harry Potter, has suffered beyond anything he has ever told us, and likely to tell us. I think the one reason he went to Azkaban this morning was because he truly believes it cannot stand against him."

Remus sighed. "But there are Dementors, Death Eaters and Voldemort himself is probably there! What power can stand against that?"

"I do not know of any that can," Dumbledore said unexpectedly.

Remus shook his head. "That's because there isn't one, Albus," he said. "Magic simple isn't strong enough for that."

To his surprise, Dumbledore laughed gently. "Oh, Remus," he said. "I have walked on this earth for over one and a half centuries. I have been around long enough to know how ignorant I am in the workings of the universe and magic. Having been using magic for thousands of years you would think we would know more about its origins, why it exists... But we know next to nothing. And that is why we should be

prepared for anything if we are willing to dabble in something as uncertain as Magic."

Smiling slightly, Remus said, "I'm willing to bet you've spent a lot of time studying all we do know though, to know our limits. To know what we can and cannot do."

"As I said," Dumbledore shrugged. "There are no certain facts in this subject."

"But what do you *believe*?" Remus asked.

"I do not believe for one moment that Magic obeys our preconceptions of what it should be. But I think in Harry we see a glimpse of what Magic truly is, in its rarest form - that has existed long before humans first acquired it, and will exist long after the human species ceases to be." Dumbledore's face took on a far away dreamy look, and also one of surety. "In Harry, Remus, we see the strength - the Magic - that keeps any universe alive. Now tell me, if you can, what could stand against that?"

\*\*\*\*

"*Incendio Aduro!*" James roared, and the fourteen sharp blades of pure ice shooting through the air towards him melted in mid air.

"*Avada Kedavra!*"

Harry and his companions stood at one end of a long corridor on the fifteenth level of Azkaban prison, and were as of right now duelling for their very lives with seven Death Eaters. Surprising James, Dermal and Cedric, Harry ran forward to meet the Killing curse and took off at a run they didn't think possible in his tired and weary state.

"HARRY!" Cedric called, but Harry did not heed him.

Working fast, Harry wrenched two of the prison cell doors from their frames as the curse approached with a deadly accuracy. In the split second between life and death, Harry threw the door in front of the pointed green light as he ran and it exploded with a deafening boom that rocked the stone walls.

*"Amos Cri!"* he cried, ducking under the falling remains of one of his doors and using the other one as a shield in front of him and to his left. His palm glowed amazingly - blindingly - for a moment and then six silver arrows shot out of the glowing light in his palm.

Being real, physical objects, the arrows were not slowed down by the Death Eaters small shield charms. Three of the seven fell as the arrows, travelling just short of the speed of sound, passed right through them and came to a quivering stop seven inches into the wall of the prison behind the Death Eaters.

*"Vestic,"* spat one masked man.

Harry moved the other floating door into its way and five seconds later he was stepping over the wreckage of that one as his companions came running up behind him to stand at his side., and as one they raised their wand arms towards the four remaining enemies.

*"Reducto!"* James said.

*"Derius Nos!"* was Trask's incantation.

*"Prisux Ex!"* cried Cedric.

*"Vestic!"* Harry whispered, but the curse shot out of his hand with more power than the other three curses combined, and reached the Death Eaters first.

The battle was over with that.

Checking the remaining cells for any sign of life, James, Harry, Dernas and Cedric stepped over the fallen bodies of the Death Eaters and on up to the stairs that led to the sixteenth floor of the accursed prison.

Harry was dizzy with fatigue and his legs protested every step up higher into the prison. He knew the others were probably feeling the strain as well - Cedric probably the most, but they all kept their silence. Complaint was useless and what they still had to do was more important (and worth) than their pain.

"Anyone else missing daylight?" Trask asked quietly after Harry blasted the door out of their path. "*Detus Nosum!*" He cast the familiar detection spell down the long dark corridor.

"What's daylight?" Cedric asked with little humour. Having been in Azkaban for two weeks and seeing nothing but stone walls in that time, he had little to no sense of humour left.

"I think we have to be approaching the top of the fortress now," James said quietly, a harsh whisper was all that came out of his mouth.

"Floor sixteen, I think," said Harry. "Although I may be one or two floors out either way."

Halfway down that corridor they came across an Auror in one of the dark horrible cells. They portkeyed her out, and knew she was Auror number sixteen; so that strengthened their resolve that they were approaching the end of this ordeal - however it would turn out. The next corridor was tripped with *three* magical mines that Dernas' detection spell picked up. They had to jump over the far one as it was two laid across the entire width of the corridor.

Level seventeen of the prison was, of course, identical to its sixteen predecessors. Harry swayed a little as his vision went all blurry for a few moments, but it mercifully passed and the four of them moved on. Another Auror was portkeyed to safety from this level, near death and in possession of a leg wound that had turned gangrenous. Harry thought the Healers would probably take one look at it and then amputate it. He severely doubted magic's ability to heal *that* wound.

It was then though, that Harry, James, Dernas and Cedric were knocked to the ground, as a loud explosion sent shudders and power through the rock above them. Something, somewhere, had just collapsed.

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"Their progression up the castle was expected, sir," Bellatrix Lestrange told Voldemort's son. "But not their ability to remove the

captured Aurors from the island. There is a man with them who can create Portkeys."

"The loss of the Aurors is acceptable," the teenager said in no more than a whisper. A whisper that carried to every corner of the roof, that all the Death Eaters heard. Melissa heard it as well. "You said one was helping them?"

Bellatrix nodded. "Shall we proceed with the Master's orders?" she then asked.

The evil youth considered this for a moment. This order would require the use of the new destructive spell his father had created and perfected in one of the many dark creation chambers deep within the tunnels of Slytherin Fortress. It was a spell created for the sole purpose of destruction. It was a spell that could, and would, destroy Azkaban.

"Of course you should," he replied harshly, and Bellatrix took a step back as she felt the hot power exude off him. "Take Malfoy and Nott... and; yes, take Dolohov, Macnair and Rodolphus as well. This will need the combined strength of all of you. Go down to the front of the castle, take your brooms, and cast it in exactly one and a half hours. We will slow down Potter."

Bellatrix bowed, not as low as she would have for the Dark Lord, but still enough so respect was shown to his blood. As she and the other members of the inner circle who knew the incantation and movements for the new curse, flew down to the castle entrance, the hooded teenager turned to another group of Death Eaters.

"You twelve," he said, and the group stood to attention immediately. "Head down to floor eighteen and collapse one of the passages. The intruders must be slowed down. Go now."

Melissa watched and heard all of this through tear stained eyes and cheeks. She was bound and tied to a chair near the cold teenager who had spent the better part of yesterday torturing her. *And damn it*, she thought, she had talked. Although she suspected she hadn't said anything the man hadn't already known or assumed.



Still, she felt hope blossom in her heart. Harry had come for her. She wasn't sure of him, didn't trust him, but she knew instinctively that her life was in his hands, and she knew he was the type of person that would die before leaving her here. And the torturer had said that there were others with him, and the Death Eaters had whispered the name James Potter. She hoped they made it through alive; she hoped and wished for longer than she ever had in her life up to that point.

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Harry, James, Dermal and Cedric were approaching the staircase to the eighteenth floor when there was a sudden and ground shaking crash that had all of them reaching for a hold on the damp walls as dust and small bits of stone rained down upon them. It wasn't as bad as the previous crash, but all of them could grasp what it meant.

"What the bloody hell was that?" Dermal asked.

"I think we'll find out in a minute," Harry said.

They progressed onto the eighteenth floor of the island prison as wearily and as resolutely as they had the seventeenth. A cloud of dust hung in the air and made breathing not only difficult, but also painful. It did not last long though, and no sooner had the four companions begun to walk through the dust clouds, did they begin to settle on the damp and filthy stone of the prison.

Harry coughed as he checked the nearest cell for life, and with a weary sigh, wrenched the lock from the splintered oak of the black barred door. It fell open, just like the previous eighteen, and half a minute later another Auror had been transported by Portkey to safety.

The reason for the dust became apparent when the four tired wizards turned off the first corridor of the eighteenth floor and onto the second. It was dark here, so dark that Dermal didn't even see the obstacle in his path until he had fallen over it, hitting the floor hard and cursing extensively under his breath.

"Rock there," Cedric mumbled.

"No shit," Dermas stated and then got achingly back to his feet. He had barely taken one step before he said, "Aww shit."

Harry had his hand on the black broken wall to his right, the other arm - with his broken wrist - tucked protectively against his side. In one moment of swift realisation, two things became apparent to the band of weary wizards. One, they now knew what had caused the mass of dust, and two, they now knew what the crash and shaking had been of a moment ago.

The second corridor on the eighteenth floor had been destroyed, or rather, blocked off by the rock from the ceiling - what was the floor of the nineteenth floor, and from the two walls that ran parallel along the corridor. Tonnes upon heavy, heavy tonnes of black dusty rock was piled in their way. The work of many blasting curses and destructive dark magic had created an almost impassable maze of sharp rock in their path.

"Well this is bollocks," Trask stated eloquently.

Harry was too tired to be bothered by it, and with only one goal in mind (to see this through to the end - to never give up) he began to destroy the mountain of jumbled rock in their path. He began with searing hot blasting curses, and disintegrated rock that way, but that soon became too hard. He moved on to simply vanishing the rock, which was less exerting - and his three companions began to do the same.

"This was meant to slow us down," James said, casting a vanishing charm on a large piece of rock that may once have been a piece of the left wall. He watched it disappear to nothing, and then moved on. "We got here faster than they thought we would."

"Which means whoever's on the roof has a plan that they want to see carried out before we get there."

"Well at least we know not everything is going there way then," Harry said, and with a thought three large slabs of dark rock blinked out of existence. His power was changing again.

It was slow going, and in the end that had been the point, one hour later and Harry, James, Dermal and Cedric finally blasted through the debris and turned onto the third, and clear corridor on the eighteenth floor.

Harry's forehead was alive with a deep throbbing pain that was a headache brought on by the Dementors. He knew they had taken too long blaring that rock, and his arms ached as if he had moved it all without magic, and now whatever plan the Queen on the roof had, it was probably too late to stop. *But not to save lives*, Harry thought, and quickly fell back into the routine of checking the cells for Aurors. He just hoped none that no prisoners had been in the cells on the ill-fated second corridor.

"I've got a funny feeling we're all going to die soon," Trask said humourlessly. "And with that said, does anyone want a Portkey out of here?"

Dermal had to say it, but he didn't even bother to make one because he knew they were in this to the end - whatever that may be. He felt inexplicably drawn towards this Harry Potter. There was something about him that brought out the best in anyone, and right now he would follow him into hell and back. *Had, he thought. Followed him in anyway, he might be damned to die in this place.*

It was nothing he could explain, and it was this feeling more than anything else - more than the threat on the life of James' daughter - that had caused him to turn the key in the ignition of his old speed boat nearly eleven hours ago, and foolishly storm the fortress of Azkaban.

"Just as well," Trask said. "I don't think I've got the strength in me to create another one."

Harry's blurred and sleep deprived mind was doing some quick calculations as they traipsed down the dark corridors on that floor. He was trying to work out how many Death Eaters to expect on the roof, if Barty Crouch had been telling the truth nearly seven hours ago, and that there were fifty five Death Eaters on the island, not counting the thirty Harry had punched through to make it to the doors of the prison.

He couldn't recall with any clear certainty how many the four of them had fought within the dark corridors, but he felt certain it was more than twenty, but less than thirty. *Can probably expect at least two dozen to be standing against us*, he thought as they walked along the nineteenth floor, Trask occasionally casting his detection charms. *And Ethan... maybe Voldemort.*

"There are still two Aurors somewhere in here as well," Cedric said, thinking of his comrades.

"Whether they're living or dead we'll find them," Harry whispered with a sense of finality, suspecting the men were dead.

Up ahead, a small spot of light flooded the floor. It was tiny, but it fell from above the floor and it was no torchlight. James recognised it for what it was instantly.

"Daylight..." he breathed.

"There's a rather... ominous feel to it, don't you think lads?" Trask whispered.

Harry glanced at his swollen wrist and saw the dark purple bruising - almost black - had covered his entire forearm just short of the elbow. He also took a few deep breaths, ignoring the sharp stab of pain from his cracked ribs. Shaking his head of weariness as well as he could, Harry finally turned to his companions and nodded to each of them in turn.

"Whatever's up there..." he began carefully, straining to hear any sound at all besides the constant drip of some unseen water source. "Whatever's up there, we give it our all. We won't be given mercy and I'm not going to show it. Perhaps we can convince them to just surrender, but they'll be confident. I have a feeling the Death Eater's up there are loyal to Voldemort's cause and are not just following him out of fear. If any stand in our way, you know what to do."

*Maybe its fate*, thought Harry, as the four of them marched silently towards the daylight. Maybe it was his fate to always be the one to take a stand. Fate who always helped him survive, whilst his

companions around him always made the ultimate sacrifice - moving on without him to whatever lay beyond life.

Harry didn't know why he was such a key figure in the workings of universes. He really didn't want to believe in fate... didn't want to believe that some force greater than he could choose his actions for him, and lay out his life already planned before his feet. It didn't seem right somehow. What was he? The creation of some writer in a far away and inaccessible universe? No... that was wrong. He was real, what he lived in was reality - merely a different version of it.

*I could get a headache thinking about this*, he thought with a small smile. The smile faded somewhat when he realised he already had a headache. *Oh well*, he then thought as he took the first step into the light and the first step onto the last set of stairs that led up.

"It was fun, guys," Trask said defiantly, against the misery of this place. "We saved a lot of lives..."

"That we did," whispered James, flexing his sore hand. "And we have a few more to save yet."

The sky was overcast over Azkaban Island as the four tired, and nearly defeated, friends struggled up the last stone step and on to the roof of the prison. For a few brief seconds the pale light was too much on their eyes, and a long moment of glare blindness followed this ascending up to the roof of the fortress.

Harry was the first to recover, as he always was and always would be, and therefore he was first to see the lines of dark robed wizards and witches, standing atop of this prison silently along with him. Death Eaters, at least thirty, with wands drawn and hooded eyes. They stood thirty or so feet away, and Harry didn't even bother to defend himself. They were close enough to wipe him out if they chose to.

James, Derris and Cedric had already risen to his side, and now stood bravely against the wave of masked enemies. The silence was absolutely *deafening* - nothing moved, even the wind that blew their robes around them in small clouds was quiet, as if nature itself had sensed the tense atmosphere atop the prison.

The only noise that did reach Harry's ears, and even then it was faint, was the crashing sound of the sea against the rocky outcrops of the island coastline. His palm twitched expectantly, and he glanced expertly to his left then right, not fearing but anticipating an ambush. There was no need however, they were outnumbered and outgunned straight ahead - and the Death Eaters knew that.

"This could be bad..." whispered James. "I don't see Melissa anywhere."

His voice carried well over the roof, and everyone standing upon it heard what he said. Slowly, and mockingly, a pair of hands came together behind the assembled Death Eaters in a rough round of applause. The black robed servants of the Dark Lord cleared the way between their lines and a figure dressed entirely in black, his hood hanging around his shoulders and his black hair moving in the wind, smiled despicably at them and continued to clap.

Harry took one look at this figure and stepped forward thoughtlessly, his companions falling into step behind him. Harry marched across the roof with no emotion showing on his tired and pale face. He supposed he struck a frightening figure for the Death Eaters ahead of him. His clothes clung to him with sweat and blood, and his face was both slick with, and stuck with, dried blood. Half his face was a red bloody mess.

His hair stuck up every which way, just like his father's on the left, and both of their glasses were missing a single lens, making their job now all the more difficult. Harry closed the gap between himself and the Death Eaters to nothing more than fifteen feet, before coming to a silent - unblinking - stop.

"Well done, Harry," the familiar yet entirely different version of Ethan said. "Most impressive. My father has lost another fifty servants today - really a small price to pay to end your interference."

Harry remained stoically silent as Ethan spoke. His voice was cold, harsh and his eyes were tinted red. He had been submerged in the Dark Arts for too long - probably since birth. Harry thought he could actually see his pulsating black aura, but perhaps that was just his fatigued mind playing tricks on him.

"Where's my daughter?" asked James, who stood strongly next to Harry. "Where's Melissa?"

Ethan, or whatever he called himself, never removed his eyes from Harry's, but clicked his fingers and nodded with his head. Crouch appeared from behind the gaggle of Death Eaters, holding a bound and gagged figure in front of him with his wand. He had that infuriating smile upon his face and a cold glint within his eyes.

"MELLISA!" James cried upon seeing his daughter unable to move before Crouch. He thought she looked beaten, sick, and he recognised the after effects of Cruciatus. It was in the eyes.

"Make one move, Mr. Potter," the teenage youth said, still staring at Harry, "and Crouch kills her now."

James glared defiantly at the boy who, in another life within another universe, had taken a completely different path. James saw reason though, and he also felt that Harry didn't want him to move.

Silence again. So easy to obtain, and yet so easily broken.

"Have you nothing to say, hero?" Ethan asked Harry. "Final words, perhaps?"

Harry swallowed and blinked away the black dots before his vision. "Where is your father?" he asked quietly.

"My father does not trouble himself with the likes of you, Potter," Ethan replied.

And it was Ethan, Harry would always know him as Ethan. A boy who, in his world, had made some terrible mistakes, but all the right choices.

"So in other words," Harry whispered dangerously. "He's licking his wounds. He's scared."

Fury ran across those red eyes viciously, and Ethan waved his hand. The Death Eaters moved aside once again, and there kneeling behind them were two blindfolded men, in dirty white robes. There

were the final two Aurors, and standing behind them were Lucius Malfoy and Vincent Crabbe. In a blur, Ethan brought his hand swinging down - a command of some type.

Dermas and Cedric both cried out in shock as, with a flick of their wands, long scythes grew out of the tip and with no more than a brief cutting motion, the two blinded Aurors were beheaded... executed. James' eyes widened in shock and revulsion as the men, whose only crime was to get caught in the way, died on their knees - killed by men they would never see - their heads rolling a few useless feet from their necks. Blood began to pool soon after.

Voldemort's son, Voldemort's only heir if his quest for immortality failed, watched Harry Potter's reaction to this display of murder, and was, for the first time in his life, unnerved by what he saw on the face of his enemy. Two men had just been beheaded in cold blood for his insolence, and Potter didn't even blink, moreover it looked like he came to some sort of decision.

'You just lost any chance of leaving this island alive," Harry said calmly, and glanced briefly out over to where he knew the coast of Scotland lay - although he was too far out to sea to be able to see it. The black dots were swimming before his eyes again, and this time there were dozens of them. He shook his head, and they didn't disappear. He turned back to Ethan quickly.

He had seen what would happen to those Aurors a moment before it actually happened. Harry had taken their lives within his hands and sacrificed them for the rest. He knew to act then would have sentenced probably everyone on that rooftop besides himself to death, so he had... for all intents and purposes... let them die. He was very nearly sick.

"Do not be a fool, Potter," Ethan snapped, fire glowing in his eyes. "You're tired, you're broken, you're friends and father are on the same path. There are thirty two of us, and only four of you. What could you hope to achieve now?"

Harry shrugged, knowing they had a chance. He knew those dots in his vision were not brought on by sleep deprivation - some of them were- but the majority were not an illusion. Reinforcements were only



a few minutes flight from the castle. Behind him, Cedric looked over the shoulders and heads of his enemy, and saw the same thing. He realised in that moment what Harry's entire plan was: *To keep them talking for as long as he could, to keep them all alive.*

"I've had worse odds, Ethan," Harry said, and then caught his tongue.

The boy in front of him, Ethan, frowned. "Are you all brawn and no brain, Potter?" he asked bitterly. "Why do you call me Ethan?"

"Because that's who you are," Harry shrugged. *Confusion was always a powerful ally.* "Or rather... that's who you should be."

"You're not making sense, Potter," the boy who was once Ethan said, his eyes still glaring frightfully. Behind him the Death Eaters still stood as silent as statues, even Malfoy and Crabbe, who were standing in blood. "But I've grown tired of this... you're marked for death and so it shall be."

Faster than even Harry could see, Ethan had drawn his wand and now had it pointed directly between Harry's eyes. Dermal almost fell back in surprise at the speed of that draw. "I'll ask again," Ethan was now smiling. "Any final words?"

"A few," Harry said, not flinching even though he could feel the raw power on his face from the tip of that wand, which rested only three inches away. "Surrender or die."

Harry didn't expect a response, and he had already pooled some magic in the palm of his hand before giving Ethan a chance to, but if Ethan was going to give an answer, Harry didn't get to hear it, because at that moment the very foundations of the fortress - which had survived the centuries - shook as magic ripped into its core.

It seemed then, that some force both light and dark tore through the sky above Azkaban, as everyone bar Harry and Ethan fell to their feet as the castle shook, Bellatrix Lestrange and her group having now fulfilled their task. Harry didn't know it then, but the fortress would now fall - it was only a matter of time.

"WHAT HAPPENED?" he called above the noise of the shaking, glancing quickly at the approaching dots on the horizon. Aurors, and lots of them.

Ethan was smiling, sadistically. "This is what happens to those who challenge the Dark Lord," he spat, although with obvious pride. "This prison will collapse in on itself soon enough, under the power of my father's new destructive curse."

The noise died down for a moment and the shaking stopped as well, but Harry could still feel the magic at work in the bowels of the castle, working its way up to the top. The magic, whatever the incantation was, sought out the weaknesses and structural integrity points within the fortress... and pushed. The fortress would fall, and the only thing any of them had left was time.

If not for what happened next, James and Dermas would probably have died in those next crucial minutes, and while what saved them may not seem a good thing at the moment, it did, in the end, save a whole deal more.

"SIR!" Bellatrix Lestrange called, flying up and onto the roof of the castle from down below. Four more Death Eaters followed her. She appeared over the fortifications, a wild look of anticipation in her eyes.

Most were still getting back to their feet after the initial tremor, but Ethan was as alert as Harry was, and he still had his wand trained on him. "WHAT IS IT?" he called, watching his nemesis with a calm anger.

*Beware the fury of a patient man.* The same could have been said for Harry.

"In the distance," breathed Bellatrix. "Aurors, several dozen..."

Ethan, for half a second, took his eyes off Harry and turned to look out to sea. Harry knew the game at this point was up, and made his final move. It was a mistake, but he did it. When he saw Ethan's gaze leave his own, Harry closed his powerful right fist and knocked the pure magic there out of existence, instead - with a lightning fast reflex,

he balled his hand into a fist and brought it up under Ethan's jaw - fast and hard.

If Harry was fast though, then Ethan was nothing short of miraculous. Turning so fast he'd done it before any of them registered what they had seen, Ethan grasped Harry's rising fist with his own, and Harry had a moment to realise the strength in his limbs before he squeezed hard. Momentary surprise shook Harry, and the castle shook again with him, as Ethan had caught his jaw breaking punch a second before it would have done just that.

He saw the brief smile on his face, and then his hand erupted in pain as Ethan brought his wand around quickly, and placed the tip on his middle lower knuckle. "*Cusindeo!*" the Dark Lord's nameless son said, and the dark red light that flowed from his wand broke every bone in Harry's right - and up until that point only functioning - hand.

"Christ," James said sharply, and pulled Harry back as Dermas and Cedric raised their wands.

Two blue conical shield charms burst into existence in a flash of white light - directly in front of Harry and James. A brief wall of protection.

Ethan was still smiling as he raised his wand again and tapped the tip against the blue wall. The Death Eaters behind him had sprung into action, as Malfoy had taken control, and were now lining the castle fortifications and awaiting the approaching Aurors.

Harry's hands - both of them - were useless. He fell back on top of James as the shield charms were raised, his right hand beyond pain. It was a monumental struggle to get back to his feet, as his legs refused to hold him now that he was down, but with help from James he did it.

Vaguely, as if through a haze, he heard and saw the first round of curses being fired at the approaching Aurors, who had spread out along the sky to take back the fortress. The prison shook again and the stone floor underneath Harry's feet cracked, but held. Near death, but still going strong, Harry returned his gaze to Ethan, as a few useless curses impacted against their shields.

Small drops of rain had begun to fall now, from the weak storm clouds overhead. A cool wind blew as two very familiar and devastating words cut into Harry.

*"Avada Kedavra,"* Ethan said calmly.

Both Dermas and Cedric widened their eyes in surprise and then fear. It was one of the last things one of them would ever do.

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"We're still about thirty minutes flight from the island," Remus said, raising his voice a little as he flew alongside Dumbledore. "We'll feel the wards any minute now."

The forty five men and women flew on strongly, having now been flying for a few hours. All they knew was that Azkaban had been broken, and it was their job to take it back and make sure no one left the island. No one knew anything else, except for Remus and Dumbledore. Rumours were abound though, and the strongest one among the Auror squad was that the boy, Harry Potter, had already stormed the island earlier that morning.

It hadn't been denied.

When they past through the wards they went slow as the strength within the large ward bubble was enough to throw even the most accomplished flier from their broom. No sooner had Remus broke through the wards than his eyes fell upon the island prison, or more accurately the dozens of darkly cloaked figures upon its roof.

Lupin also noticed the Dementors. At least fifty stood guard at the entrance to Azkaban on top of the hill in front of the fortress's great wooden doors. Landing would prove difficult, although he suspected few of them - if any - would be.

"They'll see us soon," Remus said to Dumbledore. "What do you think, full on attack against those on the roof?"

Dumbledore sighed and raised his broom handle a little to slow himself down. "Yes, Remus," he said. "Although not everyone on that roof may be an enemy."

Remus nodded and then motioned to his designated lieutenants. With a few arm and wand movements he passed the message to attack down the line - also to do it from the air and watch for friendly fire.

Their approach was seen as they were still half a mile out, and Lupin past another message down the lines. *Be ready to use evasive action.*

The Aurors were closing the gap fast, and could now see the Death Eaters on top of the prison swarming into place along the long fortress walls and defensive positions. Curses would soon be hot in the air.

As one, the entire Auror battalion - the large body of organised troops - put on an impressive burst of speed. They flew through wind and rain as the choppy sea beneath them tossed and churned in the ever growing weather conditions. Remus' face was soon slick with water and his hair clung to his head, as did his robes to his body.

When it happened, it happened fast.

Colour... greens, reds, blues, yellows... shot forth from the rooftop of Azkaban in a large arcing rainbow. Synchronised, impressive, deadly. A barrage of colour that carried death and destruction within it. Lines and lines of curses streamed through the air from over thirty different wands as the Death Eater onslaught began. For one brief moment the entire front side of the upper castle glowed with the magic, and then the Aurors were flying for their lives.

Remus held his course steady for a few hundred feet, and those who watched him then thought for one brief moment he was going to intercept the curses head on, but just as they met in the middle, Remus dived sharply, cutting a path through the rain and dodging all of the curses.

Dumbledore was no where near as fast, but he was still agile. The old headmaster didn't begin to fly rings around the curses, nor did he do anything overly spectacular. He kept a steady course, and deflected

all but the most deadly curses from his path. He saw Aurors fall - struck dead by Killing curses - out of the corners of his eyes. Remus saw the same thing, and they pushed on regardless. *There were always casualties.*

Remus dodged the green light of death and took a severing charm across his left arm for this manoeuvre; it cut his white robes open and straight through his flesh and muscle, sending a brilliant splash of blood streaming through the air behind him. It was a clean cut, and it began to sting immediately.

Remus held strong though, and was soon soaring over the prison. With forty good men behind him.

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*"Avada Kedavra!"*

Harry moved fast and pushed James back as he had done to him only a moment ago. Both of them fell to the ground just as Cedric and Derris both turned to jump out of the curse's way. Death was faster though, and Harry gritted his teeth in an all too familiar pain as the green light - the jet of pure death - struck Cedric high on his left shoulder, and sent him spinning in a tumble of broken limbs back over Harry and James, his dead foot kicking James in the face as he flew, knocking his glasses off and bruising his cheek.

*Once again, Cedric Diggory was dead.*

Harry watched him die as the body past over his head with the last tendrils of green light still clinging to his chest. The sky above had opened up and a single ray of sunlight almost blinded his vision, so Cedric appeared as only a black silhouette as he tumbled over and over silently. He hit the broken rooftop with a thud, and there was no more.

*'Wands out, d'you reckon?'*

*'KILL THE SPARE!'*

Harry lay on the cracking and falling rooftop and - in one brief and painful moment - relived all his worst memories up until that point. It wasn't brought on by the Dementors either. His head lay against the cool stone and he could see Cedric's lifeless eyes staring at him, guiltless even in death.

It was one of those brief moments for Harry, where time slowed down and he had the wit and ability to see everything that was happening in a crystal clear clarity. *Dead*, he thought emotionlessly, glancing at Cedric. *Murderer*, he thought just as calmly, glancing back at Ethan, whose lips were slowly curving up into a hateful smile.

*What now?*

Above him raindrops fell gently, slowly - a few only now just breaking on his weary and bloody face. Aurors flew in amazing arcs and loops, outrunning the inevitable that came in the form of three dozen colourful curses. And beneath him, the fortress of Azkaban cracked and groaned as it was brought down from within.

Harry's gaze also fell on something else, something behind Dermas (who had hit the ground in a graceful arc of his own) *Why does it always have to be graceful?*

Heading down the stone stairs that led back into the prison was Barty Crouch Jr, and in front of him floated Melissa - held in place by a body binding jinx, and a levitation charm. Harry frowned at this, and then the world sped up again - a thousand sounds assaulting his ears.

In a flash Harry was on his feet, broken wrists and hands hanging uselessly at his side. James was seeing stars and struggling backwards over Cedric's body searching for his glasses, and Dermas wasn't moving at all. Harry briefly hoped he was alive, but had bigger problems for now. He did spy Dermas' sword hanging in its sheath around his belt though, and an idea began to form. *More death...*

"One less Auror to worry about," Ethan... no, this boy was too evil to be called that... said. "What now, Potter?"

Harry didn't blink or move as curses of death and pain flew around them, and rained down upon them - fired from both Aurors and Death

Eaters alike. A man fell screaming to his death barely three feet away from Harry and his broom tail was burning purple flames, but he didn't even bat an eyelid. He was beyond caring now what misery these Death Eaters could still cause... all that mattered was getting out of here alive.

"In another world you could have been so much more," Harry said, directing his thoughts towards the sword hanging on Dermas' belt. "*Were* so much more."

And with that, Harry drew the sword with his mind, and cast it through the air in a shriek of shiny silver. Voldemort's son saw it coming and his breath caught in his throat. He tried to move, but this was beyond him.

Harry's levitation charm, cast with the power of his mind - a silent spell, threw the sword (point first) at his enemy. The blade pierced him high in his left calf, and passed clean through, taking a chunk of his flesh with him. The boy's leg gave out underneath him and he screamed in pain and agony as the sword clattered unheard against the dying stone of the castle.

The foundations snapped and the fortress shook again. Harry stumbled and for a moment saw nothing but black and his vision was still blurry as he regained it. He laughed harshly and mirthlessly. *I'm gonna fall asleep*, he thought. *On top of Azkaban as it falls apart...*

Harry wasn't going to fall asleep though, he was beyond rest now and had, for what it was worth, just got his second wind. He saw a few of the Aurors landing on the roof alongside Dumbledore and Remus and he felt relieved. The Death Eaters had been defeated and even now Aurors were portkeying those who had surrendered into Ministry holding cells.

Battered and bruised, both arms useless, Harry turned back to Ethan and with another thought levitated his wand away and off the edge of the fortress - not that it mattered, he was holding his skewered leg and roaring with pain. *Checkmate*, Harry thought sardonically and then turned to see that Dermas was trying to pull himself to his feet. He had taken an Impediment jinx in the chest and it was just now wearing off.



Bodies, of course, littered the roof which was now cracked in several places, and the deep rumbling Harry could feel under his feet was enough of an incentive for him to start screaming that they had to get out of there.

"THE CASTLE IS FALLING!" he called, although his voice was as cracked and broken as the rooftop. Behind him James was on his feet and began to search frantically for Melissa among the bodies that covered the breaking roof.

"HARRY!" called Dumbledore, stepping over and clearing a path to the teenage wizard. Remus was next to him, and as soon as he spotted Ethan lying in a pool of his own blood, *the sword must have taken a few veins and arteries*, shoved a Portkey into his hands and sent him into a Ministry holding cell. Healers there would see to him.

"Professor," Harry said quickly, ignoring the growing pain in his arms and chest. "The fortress is going to fall, you have to get everyone off it."

"WHERE'S MELISSA?" James called hysterically, joining his companions.

"Prongs," Remus said gently, to clam his friend down as the very ground they stood on began to crumble.

A few Aurors here and there were still duelling with those Death Eaters who would never be taken alive, but the battle was all but over. The burning smell of magic was heavy in the air, carried on the wind and rain, and several Aurors began to take flight as they saw what was happening to the prison.

"Did you see what happened, Harry?" James asked nervously, fearing the worst. *Did she fall off the roof?*

Harry held both his arms against his side and Remus winced when he saw the deep purple bruising in both. *Broken*, he thought. "We have to retreat now," he said. "Azkaban is lost. Prongs..."

"Never without Melissa," James said simply.

"Crouch took her..." Harry frowned, remembering what he had seen a minute or two ago. "Back down."

A loud and devastating crack shook the fortress again, and a large portion of the roof in the far corner crumbled and plummeted to the ground several hundred feet away.

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"I'm going," James said, and pushed past Harry. Dumbledore called him back but then, viciously, the ground upon which James was walking fell half a foot. It didn't give way to the floor below it, but it was enough for James to lose his footing and fall forward as his right foot was trapped between two fallen bricks.

*Snap*, Harry thought, a millisecond before James' ankle did indeed break. He cried out in pain and frustration, but Harry knew they were now out of time.

"I'm going," he said as Remus and Dermal rushed forward to pull James up.

"Wait..." Dumbledore said, but he saw the fire of determination upon Harry's face. He also saw his broken limbs, and wondered what Harry thought he could do. "Take this then," the headmaster said, and tucked a piece of stone into the top pocket of Harry's torn and dirty shirt.

"What-"

"A Portkey," Dumbledore said. "It will transport you into a Ministry holding cell, but you'll be safe."

Harry nodded and then, as Dermal and Remus were struggling with James - trying to pull his leg free, Harry turned for one final run. He set off at a jog as a hundred thousand tonnes of rock shook underneath his feet, and then began to sprint towards the stone staircase that led down into the castle.

*Here I go again*, Harry thought dizzily as he stepped back into the darkness of the prison. The breaking and humming was louder down

here and it rang in Harry's ears as he ran blindly down the poorly lit - and in some places dark - corridors.

His mind swayed with this exertion and he felt feverish as well as tired. Both his wrist and his right hand burnt and ached, and they were both heavily bruised and immobile. Harry tried to move any of his fingers, and was rewarded with numbing pain for his effort. He had to slow to a stop after only half a minute of running, as his chest begged for air which his lungs could not provide without affecting his snapped and bruised ribs. *How many?* he wondered, trying to recall when he had actually broken his ribs.

The fortress was cracking and breaking around him, and age old dust and chips of rock fell as he ran struggled along the dark corridors. He wondered what Crouch was trying to do, running back into the castle. Perhaps he'd gone mad? *Well*, Harry thought, *more mad*.

He came to the corridor on the eighteenth floor where he, James, Dermas and Cedric had had to clear the entire way with magic. In a way that had been a blessing, as it had given the Aurors an extra hour or so to arrive. It had saved their lives.

Harry tried running again, but could only manage a short burst of speed before his lungs and chest protested. The walls on either side of him cracked as he progressed parallel to the wall. Doors to the cells fell away from their hinges and great clumps of stone fell and broke on the floor around him.

The seventeenth floor was in a worse way, and the cracking was now deafening. Large slabs of ancient stone fell all around Harry, and he didn't try to move out of the way. If it was going to hit it would hit. He couldn't change that. All his limbs, joints and senses cried out for him to stop - it was too much, give up, have a rest. But he ignored that. He briefly thought, and this was something that came to him again later, that he should be in better shape, more properly trained. An explosion of stone from the wall next to him ended these thoughts.

When Harry reached the fifteenth floor he could actually feel the fortress of stone swaying under his feet. His hair, which was damp from the rain, was now covered in dust and he wiped the grime from

his glasses on the run. It was here though, that he caught up with Crouch.

"COME ON, GIRL!" he was screaming, as Melissa was now free. Crouch's eyes held a glint of the madness inside of him, and he was *pulling* Melissa along the broken corridor.

"Crouch!" Harry spat, running up as fast as he could.

Crouch was fast. He pushed Melissa hard into the wall where she fell, and then turned to Harry with his wand already glowing with dark magic. Harry didn't bother to use any magic whatsoever, he just through his tired and battered body into the wizard, causing fresh stabs of pain all up and through his arms.

Both of them went toppling over one another and Harry's blood soaked trousers were torn open on sharp rock, which was still falling around them dangerously. Unable to use his hands, Harry lost the advantage quickly, and Crouch soon had his own hands wrapped around Harry's throat.

"YOU JUST COULDN'T DIE, COULD YOU!?" he shouted, sending spittle into Harry's face. "WHAT ARE YOU? WHERE DO YOU COME FROM?"

Harry's wrist and hand roared with absolute pain as the air was pushed from his lungs and his throat, which was coated in blood, was squeezed. He coughed and his eyes bulged as crouch pulled him up so their faces were mere inches away from one another. Harry could feel his hot breath on his cheek, as his vision blurred again.

"DIE! DIE! DIE! DIE!"

Not really thinking anymore, Harry did the only thing that made sense and brought his forehead crashing down into Crouch's face, breaking his nose. Barty Crouch screamed in pain and stumbled, both he and Harry dizzy as they dropped to the floor - Harry landing on top. Briefly, he saw Melissa scrambling to her feet across the corridor, but then he returned to Crouch.

With a thought, Harry levitated the small disc of slate from within his top pocket, the Portkey, and thrust it into Crouch's wide open mouth, as he was screaming. "Tell your dad I said 'Hi'," Harry breathed, and then rolled off the mad Death Eater. "*Activate*," he said, with a thought towards the Portkey.

And just like that, Crouch was gone, but so was Harry's ticket out of here. The fortress was now collapsing around them.

"Harry..." Melissa said, and fell down next to him as he struggled to catch his breath and get to his feet. She grabbed his arm and he ignored the pain, as best he could, as they both staggered to their feet. "Can you walk?" she asked desperately, the corridor floor cracking and churning.

Harry could almost see the destructive magic at work, spreading through Azkaban within its brick walls like water flows in a river, shooting off at different intervals - joined by more tributaries. He knew there time was down to minutes, if that.

"The roof," he managed, the entire world spinning and every part of his body hurting. "Let's go..."

Harry staggered back down the corridor the way he had come, with Melissa on his arm - walking alongside him. She didn't seem to hurt, but tears were streaming down her face and her nose had been bleeding. The castle shook again, and this time Harry felt it going over, before it stabilised again.

Only a few torches remained lit and in place on the walls, and it was with this light that they guided themselves up to the seventeenth, and then eighteenth floors. Harry was now leaning slightly on Melissa for support, as his own legs were shaking so bad he could barely stay standing. *Too much*, he thought... *almost there*.

They were two floors away from the roof, and Harry only hoped that there were Aurors nearby that could either give them another Portkey or carry them out of here on brooms. Those two floors though, felt like long, agonising miles. Step after step he felt they took, and they seemed no closer to their goal.

"Come on, Harry," Melissa said, catching him as he stumbled. "Who's rescuing who?"

Harry smiled at that and pulled himself up, just as a large section of the floor behind them caved in with a puff of smoke and noise. They came to the stairs on the eighteenth floor, and Harry could no longer manage anything other than a hurried, limping walk. His very soul was crying out for rest, whilst his mind and heart told him to keep going, just that extra step.

The stairs were agony beyond agony, and he had to crawl up the last three. At the top Melissa pulled him to his feet again, and the staircase collapsed behind them. Taking that as a sign to hurry, Harry actually managed a short jog along this final corridor and they were halfway through the floor and had just turned onto the final corridor, where daylight was visible, when there was a brief flash of blood red light and Melissa fell to the floor, crying out in pain.

Harry stumbled and fell with her, and turned to see why she was screaming. He saw that she was grasping at her leg and frowned - that was until she pulled up the hem of her robes and he saw the piece of bone that was protruding out of her flesh. Harry took one look at it and the knowledge of what had happened came crashing down upon him like a hammer blow. She had triggered one of the magical 'mines', the preset curses. A bone breaking one. Harry had completely forgotten about it, and hadn't seen it without the detection spell.

Meanwhile, the destruction of Azkaban was still in full swing, and Harry felt the floor on which they lay was buckling, straining under the force of destructive magic. He managed to get to his knees and he saw that Melissa was valiantly pulling herself up through the tears of pain. She managed to stand first, even with the broken leg, and Grabbed Harry's broken wrist to help him the rest of the way up.

They relied on each other now, as neither of them could escape alone. Melissa threw her arm around Harry's shoulders and used him for support. Stones and rock were raining down upon them and another section of the floor gave way behind them as the two of them struggled the final few feet painfully towards daylight.

*Just one more step*, Harry kept repeating in his head - a silent mantra. *Hold on for just one more step*. His gaze had fallen to his shuffling feet, and he struggled to lift up his head occasionally to see how much closer they had managed to get. Melissa was weeping and crying out as her broken leg was disturbed, but she stayed strong. Unlike Azkaban, which only had one minute of existence left.

The strain on the lower levels, which had also been collapsing, had become too much. The weight of the rest of the fortress would bear down on it soon, and the prison would fall. The only two living beings still in it, were Harry and Melissa, and Harry knew that they'd have no time to be saved by an Auror. Another option was needed.

They reached the crumbling steps of the final floor and rain drops lashed their faces as they struggled up them. Melissa going up backwards, dragging her leg and Harry on his knees. He could see black dots above him in the sky but they were too high up to be of any use, as the fortress began to fall.

Melissa screamed again, and this had nothing to do with the pain in her leg. Azkaban was falling on its side as they reached the roof, and had already begun to tilt several degrees to the right. It crashed slowly, billowing clouds of dust rising from its base and smothering the Dementors down there. Harry was vaguely aware of his stomach in knots as they tipped.

They lay at the top of the stairs and the bodies of the dead that were still on the roof began to roll towards the tilting wall, gathering in piles against the fortifications until the piles became too high, and they fell off the castle only to plummet to the ground more than one hundred feet below.

And then, Harry saw a way out... or rather, a way off the castle. *They would jump*.

"Melissa," he said, and she turned to look at him with tear stained eyes. "Listen, get on my back...." Harry's vision went dark as he almost lost his fight to stay awake, to stay conscious, but he shook it off for what would be the final time.

"Wh- What?"

Harry frowned, he had no time to explain. He would just have to show her. Concentrating harder than he ever had on anything, Harry searched his tired mind for the familiar pull of his Animagus transfiguration. He hadn't transformed in almost three weeks, ever since that last day in his original world, and now he was near death. It was difficult.

The castle was still falling when Harry finally found what he was searching for, and pushed what he felt was a little button in his mind. A brief second later and he felt his entire body transform, as the fortress tilted to an almost dangerous angle. His front two claws gave way beneath him as they were broken, just like in his human body, so Harry pushed all his remaining strength into his hind legs, and dug his sharp claws into the stone, holding him in place.

Melissa knew what she was supposed to do, and Harry thought she wasn't going to make it. His lion's body shook with fatigue and he cried out loudly from his eagle head as she pulled herself onto him, throwing her broken leg under the wing joint of his right wing. *That'll have to do*, he thought as the stone tower was now almost tilted to thirty degrees.

He pushed his back legs hard into the ground, and kicked off just as there was a loud, unbelievable snap within the castle and the entire structure from the fourth floor up simply fell away, tearing at its foundations and plummeting to the hard earth of the island in a cloud of brick and dust.

The twenty five or so Aurors who had seen this change on the roof, were now watching both the large griffin fall, and preparing themselves for Azkaban's impact on the island. It was incredible... tonnes upon tonnes of rock crashing into the hillside upon which the tower had stood for centuries.

Harry felt and heard the castle falling behind him as he spread his wings with a phenomenal effort. He may not have flown like this for awhile, but it was something he could never forget how to do. His wings grasped the air and he tilted his griffin body, with a screaming Melissa upon his back, to catch the updraft. Unfortunately, he had



neither the strength nor the power to do that, and they began to plummet to earth just as the castle was doing right now.

Harry flapped his wings once, but that only succeeded into pushing them into a steep dive. The wind had carried them a fair distance from the tumbling fortress though, and Harry saw that they were going to crash - but it would be into the sea. *Where coming in way to fast*, he thought, struggling to open his wings against the amazing wind power.

He couldn't do it.

Melissa was still screaming, her hands buried deep into the feathers around his neck, as they fell into a quick spin, spiralling dangerously down towards the water below. Several Aurors saw them fall, and pushed their brooms after them, but the crash was now inevitable, Harry was simply too weak to do anything about it, and it was then that his body gave up anyway.

He was back in his human form and already unconscious as he hit the cold, choppy Atlantic Ocean, and the freezing water was enough of a shock to bring him back to consciousness. Harry screamed out in shock, pain and surprise as he struggled for breath, and salt water attacked his open wounds.

The splash he had created on impact now came back down in graceful streaks and droplets of hard water. Melissa was floundering around next to him and she had grasped the collar of his shirt. Later, Harry would realise it was that which kept them both afloat.

Waves slapped them left and right and Harry could only manage one short breath before he was hit in the face with a wall of water. It wasn't over though. Rocks, large slabs of stone began to rain down upon them as Azkaban prison impacted onto the hard packed dirt of the hillside it had been built upon.

The impact sent debris and dust hurtling hundreds of feet up into the air and then gravity took over and sent it hurtling back down. Unable to do anything, Harry merely struggled for breath in the cold sea as water was splashed up around Melissa and him from the falling barrage of stone.

*It's cold...* was Harry's final thought, before he slipped into unconsciousness again. Stone was still falling dangerously into the water around them, but Harry was done. If he died, he died. As long as he got to rest... it was over now, it was over. Whatever happened now, he had done enough.

The dust from the fallen fortress would hang in the air for hours after the initial impact. And twelve hours later, Muggles living in the Firth of Clyde would report seeing an amazingly bright light out to sea, which glowed for fifteen minutes. It was the wards failing, as their magic had been tied to the prison.

Azkaban, also known as a hell upon the earth, had been completely destroyed - and wiped off the face of the planet. The island prison had fallen on one world, and it had not gone quietly.

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## Chapter 12 - Hope is a Waking Dream

*Few men during their lifetime come anywhere near exhausting the resources dwelling within them. There are deep wells of strength that are never used.*

*~~Richard E. Byrd*

Sunlight streamed in majestically through the large double paned glass panelled window in the intensive care ward of St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. This hospital, hidden in plain sight, has long been a refuge for those unfortunate enough to have seen service in war. The Healers here are always on call, ready to do what they've been trained for at the slightest sign of trouble.

As it happened far too often, the beds up and down the ward were full of healing or dying men and women - Aurors for the most part, but also those civilians unlucky enough to have gotten caught in the crossfire. This particular Wednesday morning, Healers and their apprentices ran back and forth through their charges, checking conditions, administering potions or applying salves.

Even though most of the staff here were rushed off their feet, it had been an unusually quiet week in the ward, ever since those terrible events at Azkaban had occurred last Sunday. Nothing had happened since - no attacks, no deaths, no injuries. The Healers knew the reason for this of course; it was because of the patient in a room of his own down the hall.

Near death, this boy had been brought in late Sunday afternoon and had been unconscious ever since. Controlled unconsciousness though - the Healers had kept him asleep because his entire body was in danger of simply shutting down if he wasn't given a chance to fully rest, and he had so far had three days of it.

Aurors, healthy active ones, were stationed around the clock on guard outside this private room. On a rotation of eight during the day and eight during the night. The Ministry had extended all of its resources into keeping this boy alive, and these sixteen Aurors were here to make sure he stayed that way.

None of the Healers or patients on the ward had a clear idea as to why this boy required so much protection, and why only the Healer allowed to examine him was Madam Shaw - the head of the intensive care ward. She had been sworn to silence, under penalty of prosecution, not to reveal anything about the patient in that room. Whether his condition was improving, or whether he was deteriorating. No one bar Madam Shaw even knew what potions he was on.

Madam Shaw herself was given a truth potion test every time she tried to enter the room as well. The Minister of Magic had insisted that the Aurors make sure they know who was going into that room, and what their intentions were. Some might have said that was too much, but these days Death Eaters were infested everywhere, and this boy had been marked for death.

It was no secret who was in that room though. Everyone on that ward and throughout the entire hospital knew the name of the patient in that room. *The Prophet* even claimed to have been given the exclusive rights to an interview by him. How the patient had managed this in his unconscious state was still a mystery, and had been overlooked by the paper, but they apparently had it just the same.

This patient was, obviously, Harry James Potter, and he was, as of right now, blissfully unaware that the worldwide magical community was currently revolving around his head. The Auror guard that stood silently outside his room was given a wide berth by all those who happened to pass by, and that included Ministry employees.

It was approaching midmorning when Madam Shaw exited her small office in a corner of the ward, a dozen potion vials in her hands and her young apprentice - a girl just fresh out of Hogwarts - trailing at her heels with a parchment and quill, ready to make sure the dosage was recorded when the potions were administered.

"You'll be given a drop of powerful truth serum," Madam Shaw said quietly, quickly. She left no room for pleasantries - this was far too serious. "And then asked two questions. Your name, and your intentions - be sure to answer promptly, the Aurors have been ordered to... restrain... anyone they see as suspicious."

The young witch nodded, and then pushed her brunette hair back behind her shoulders - flicking her wand and causing it to bunch up on the top of her head in a stylish, but professional manner. She pocketed her wand quickly though, as it wouldn't do to have it drawn in front of the Aurors. That could result in a quick stunning, or worse.

"What about wands?" she asked.

"Surrender it when asked," Madam Shaw, an elderly witch with greying red hair and a long, slightly misshapen nose, said. "You'll get it back upon leaving the room."

The apprentice healer nodded again, but a question was nagging at her in her head - and begged to be asked. "Do you know why there's the need for all these precautions?" she asked.

Madam Shaw scowled. "You know I can't answer that, Angelina. It's going to take some convincing just to get you through the door - but I'll need you," Madam Shaw whispered, seemingly to herself. "This'll be his last dose of *these* potions, and I can't administer and record them at the same time."

Healer and apprentice fell into silence as they approached the highly guarded room at the empty end of the ward. This room had been chosen because the corridor led to nowhere after it - it ended. A window looked out upon greater London, but that had been magically sealed and would no longer be opened of an afternoon, to let in a slight breeze. It was another precaution.

Three Aurors stood silently in front of this window - one watching the hall, another two constantly glancing out of the window for any sign of trouble. The five other Aurors were standing in a basic battle formation. Two were on the door to the patient's room, while the remaining three stood with wands drawn and eyes glancing down the corridor. Madam Shaw and her apprentice were now approaching them from.

"Well let's get this over with then," Madam Shaw said exasperatedly when she reached the Auror in charge - Kingsley Shacklebolt.

"Who's this?" Kingsley asked calmly, although there was a suspicious tone in his voice that they all caught. He was looking at Madam Shaw's apprentice.

"This is my apprentice," Madam Shaw said. "Angelina Johnson. I'll need her assistance today when giving the patient his potions."

Shacklebolt glanced at her, and his trained mind saw the signs of an honest person in her eyes. He saw apprehension, no doubt because of his presence, and also determination. She was here to do something, but that something remained to be seen.

"Very well, as long as she passes the test and surrenders her wand. Jones, Tonks. Two drops of the truth serum please."

The two Aurors stationed outside of the door moved away from their stations and walked the few feet over to Kingsley and the Healers. The first female Auror, Tonks, stopped in front of Angelina and removed a vial of clear potion from within her robes. Hestia Jones, the other Auror, approached Madam Shaw in the same manner.

It took a moment, but the serum was placed on both of their tongues and their eyes took on a glazed expression. It wasn't Veritaserum, as that stuff could be dangerous administered more than once a day, and Madam Shaw had to check the patient at least half a dozen times. No, this potion was watered down Veritaserum - not as strong, diluted, but still ninety percent effective on the average witch or wizard.

"Name?" Jones and Tonks both asked in unison.

"Susannah Shaw."

"Angelina Johnson."

"Why do you want to enter this room?"

"To administer healing potions to Harry James Potter," Madam Shaw said promptly.

"To record administration and dosage of healing potions to Harry James Potter," Angelina said soon after.

Kingsley nodded and then Tonks and Jones gave each of the women a drop of the antidote. It took a few moments, but their heads slowly cleared and they became more aware of their surroundings.

"Satisfied?" Madam Shaw asked wearily.

"Yes," Shacklebolt nodded. "Your wands please."

Tonks and Jones accepted the two wands and placed them deep within the folds of their spacious robe pockets. Madam Shaw then retrieved her potion vials from the table next to her, and nodded to Angelina. They had to wait another minute outside of the door as Tonks removed the complex wards and locking charms placed upon it, but eventually they entered the room, accompanied by Kingsley.

"Make it quick ladies," Shacklebolt said. "The Minister himself is coming by later on today to speak to this boy."

Madam Shaw turned and glared at the Auror. "Well unless he wants the boy to be unconscious when he arrives, then you better let us get on with it."

Kingsley waved his hand dismissively. He didn't want to argue, he was just following orders and procedure. Madam Shaw nodded, and then turned back to her patient, who was still asleep in his bed. She sat down with her potion vials on the bedside table next to her and Angelina pulled up a chair to sit opposite her on the other side of the bed.

Her eyes fell to the pale and scarred face of the boy sleeping a dreamless sleep in the bed before her. His eyes were moving underneath his closed eyelids, and there seemed to be a strained expression upon his face - although it was barely noticeable, and he was only frowning slightly. Nevertheless, Angelina wasn't entirely sure he wasn't dreaming, but her common sense told her otherwise. Madam Shaw had administered several vials of *Dreamless Sleep* potion. The boy needed his rest, and that meant no dreams.

"He looks as if he's dreaming..." Angelina commented quietly, glancing from his closed dancing eyes and up to Madam Shaw's behind her wire framed rimmed spectacles.

"Nonsense, dear," Madam Shaw said indifferently, and then picked up a vial from the rack of about a dozen. She examined it closely, her sharp eyes reading the label quickly and expertly.

"This is the *Awakening Draught*," Madam Shaw then said, glancing at the quill poised in Angelina's hand. "One dose, fifty millilitres, should only take a few minutes."

Angelina nodded and the sound of her quill scratching on the parchment filled the quiet room. The room itself was nothing too special, but it was still impressive compared to most of the rooms in the hospital. This one had its own shower and toilet - most didn't on the intensive care ward, as the patients were most of the time too sick to use them. Also, this was one of the only private rooms with a large window looking out onto London, like the one outside the room. This window had undergone the same wards as the other, and would likely never open again.

Gently, Madam Shaw pried open the boy's jaw, and Angelina saw he had been gritting his teeth. *Another sign that he's been dreaming...?* Angelina wondered, but Madam Shaw didn't seem to notice it as she poured the red potion down the boy's throat. He coughed only once, and then the potion was in him. His face softened somewhat after that, and his eyes began to move faster under his eyelids.

"Two or three minutes..." Madam Shaw mumbled, and then pulled the next potion vial off the wooden holding rack. "Replenishing potions next," she said, and once again examined the potion she held in her hand. "Oh dear..."

"What is it?" Angelina asked quickly.

"Something the matter?" asked Kingsley, still standing against the door like a guardian sentinel.

"This is the wrong dilution..." Madam Shaw grumbled. "Quarter strength..."

"You brought the wrong potion?" Kingsley asked.



Madam Shaw shook her head. "It's the right potion, wrong strength. I'll have to go and get another... Angelina, dear, watch him will you."

Madam Shaw stood up and began to walk away, but Angelina said, "What if he wakes up? You've given him the potion for that."

"He probably will while I'm away," Madam Shaw said thoughtfully. "Just tell him whatever he asks, if you can, dear. I'll be about ten minutes... although the Aurors outside will slow me down somewhat. More likely fifteen minutes, just make sure he doesn't try to move - he still needs these potions."

Kingsley stepped out of the way and Angelina turned back to the young man when he uttered a small moan, but his eyes remained closed. She heard the door close behind her and sighed. "Is it true this boy beat You-Know-Who in a duel?" Angelina said, turning to Kingsley and raising her eyebrows.

Rubbing the stubble on his face, Kingsley nodded slowly - his eyes on Harry. "I was there," he said. "All the Aurors and Death Eaters couldn't believe what they were seeing, we all stopped duelling amongst ourselves and watched him beat You-Know-Who back. The way he duelled... I saw more magic in his spells than any I've ever seen before."

"Is that why the Ministry has you guys here?" she then asked, surprised that this man was acting more human towards her, instead of just a tight-lipped Auror.

"I wasn't told any precise details," Kingsley said, shaking his head. "But I do know we might be guarding the most important and the most powerful person on this planet. If we have any chance of ending this war, it's with keeping him alive."

Angelina took a deep breath and turned back around to Harry. Her eyes skimmed over his stirring face again and she saw the curse scar on his forehead, almost hidden beneath his long fringe. Biting her bottom lip, Angelina extended her hand towards that peculiar shaped scar, and as her fingers pushed aside his fringe and exposed it for all to see, she had the strangest feeling.

It was, at first, one of heat. She could feel heat rising off the lightning bolt that marked Harry Potter's forehead, and then a jolt of something unexplainable ran through her entire body - and she had a brief glimpse of a...

*Demon...*

Reacting instinctively, Angelina pulled her hand away and held it close. Much to her surprise, it felt as if she had submerged it in hot water. Not boiling water, but enough to sting. The feeling was gone a moment later though, and her eyes flicked back to that scar.

Angelina shuddered as she recalled the image that had sprung to her mind when she had almost touched that scar - it had been of red eyes... blood red, glowing eyes and of a pale white face - long and drawn with slits where a nose should have been. A *snake*, she thought, but the image was fading from her mind.

The boy moaned again and this time Angelina caught a flash of emerald green as his eyelids fluttered open, but then closed again. He was about to wake up - any moment now he would awake, and she would have to explain everything to him. Angelina suddenly felt very small... and she didn't know why.

A feeling, completely different from the one of a moment ago, washed over her. This was one of vastness, of size unimaginable by a human mind. For one small moment, Angelina felt as if entire worlds were bending their strength and thought towards this sixteen year old boy - it was an unexplainable, but undeniable feeling. Power without limitation coursed through this young boy, he was-

Angelina shook her head of these thoughts, and the feeling retreated from her slowly - just like the tides took away the water after a wave crashed on a beach. Shuddering, Angelina realised she had been holding onto the quill in her hand so hard that she had snapped it in two. She glanced at Kingsley Shacklebolt and saw that he was also shaking his head, and seemed to have a look of extreme confusion upon his face.

*What just happened?* Angelina wondered momentarily, before those emerald green eyes opened again.

The patient in a room of his own (room 7C) opened his tired eyes slowly and first saw nothing more than a beam of pure sunlight, highlighting the tiny particles of dust that hung in the air always. He instinctively turned away from this bright light, buried his face in the pillow his head rested upon, and groaned.

Harry felt a wave of nausea and dizziness and closed his eyes into the pillow until it past. Slowly, giving his eyes time to adjust, he turned back towards the light and everything he saw was blurred slightly. He closed his eyes again as another nauseating dizzy spell swirled through his mind.

Opening his eyes again, Harry looked straight up into the plain white ceiling, which seemed to hold a certain glare with the sunlight spread across it. For a moment, Harry thought he was staring down a long white corridor, but that changed when he glanced to his right.

There was a figure seated next to him, but she (for he could see enough to be able to know this figure was female) was swimming in and out of focus. Harry made to raise his right arm out towards her, but he couldn't find the strength to lift it, and was only rewarded with a painful ache in his shoulder and hand.

"...Where...?" he said, although it was nothing more than a croaky whisper.

In a voice that was vaguely familiar, the female figure with the bunched up brown hair answered, "St. Mungo's Hospital."

"..date...?" was the next barely spoken question.

"Wednesday April 12<sup>th</sup>," came the prompt reply. "You've been unconscious for three and a half days. My name's Angelina, I'm an apprentice healer here."

It took Harry a few moments to process all of that information, as his mind was a confused and muddled mess. He wasn't entirely awake yet, and he had the worst headache. One thing did penetrate his consciousness acutely though. *Angelina...*

"Angelina..." he managed. "Angelina... who?"

"Johnson..." was the nervous reply. "Angelina Johnson."

Harry had thought so. That voice had sounded familiar to him. The brown haired blurry figure sitting to his right was Angelina Johnson. Attended Hogwarts last year, and was Harry's team mate on the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Harry tried to recall when he had last seen her, and remembered a brief visit at Diagon Alley last September.

"Apprentice Healer," he croaked. "I thought you worked at Madam Malkin's robe shop?"

Angelina frowned - she had never worked in Diagon Alley, or at a robe shop. She wondered why he had thought that about her. "No..." she said cautiously. "Why would you think that?"

Harry closed his eyes and waited for another wave of dizziness to pass. *Why would I think that?* Because she does, because she-- Suddenly, and viciously, a million images past through Harry's head of the last three weeks... it came fast and hard, and he remembered everything. *Everything...*

Angelina was watching him carefully, and briefly she saw his eyes take on a measure of intelligence and understanding she didn't think possible in his tired state - but then it was gone.

"Sorry," he whispered, thinking of her question of a moment ago. "For a minute there I was a world away..."

"It's okay," she said, smiling reassuringly even though he couldn't see it. She was just a hazy blur to him.

"Melissa...?" Harry said. "How is she?"

Angelina thought for a moment. "Your sister, yes," she nodded. "She was treated for shock and a broken leg. She was discharged on Monday."

Harry nodded slowly, so as not to make his head spin. He glanced down the bed towards his arms, and saw white bandages wrapped around, bound tight all the way up his right arm to the shoulder, and across his chest down to his left wrist. He wasn't wearing a shirt or

top of any kind, but pretty much all of his skin apart from his stomach was covered with white bandage.

"My glasses?" he asked, blinking his tired eyes a few times in quick succession. "Do I-"

"Oh," Angelina said. "Your father left you a pair," she mumbled, and reached over to his bedside table and picked up the pair of glasses that rested there. She made to pass them to him, but then her common sense caught up with her and she leaned in to place them on his face. Both his hands were tightly bound with bandages; he wouldn't be able to do it himself.

Harry felt the glasses slip onto his face and then everything came into a much sharper focus. His eyes fell on the Auror standing by the door, *Kingsley Shacklebolt*, and then he turned to Angelina.

"Thanks," he said.

Angelina smiled warmly. "How do you feel?"

Trying to shrug, but not having the strength, Harry said, "Terrible. I don't suppose you've got a headache cure?" he asked hopefully.

"I'm afraid not," she replied. "You have to take a lot more important potions first - they should help though."

Harry nodded wearily, and with a great amount of determination, struggled to sit up slightly in the bed. His joints all ached and cracked at this movement, and Harry actually felt better after that - with some of the awesome weariness he felt fading away. He turned back to Angelina, a bandaged limb resting lightly on his bandaged chest.

"So..." he whispered. "You ever play Quidditch?"

Angelina smiled kindly again. "I was on my house team back at Hogwarts," she said enthusiastically. "Gryffindor."

"A Chaser?" Harry asked, a knowing smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

"Right..." she said. "I was on the team for five years. We won the cup once."

Harry nodded weakly, and then took a deep breath - as much as his chest would allow in its bandaged state. No sooner had he done this, than the door to his room opened again quickly, and an elderly witch walked in, glaring at Kingsley as he quickly closed the door behind her.

"These precautions are really ridiculous, Mr. Shackbolt," Madam Shaw said angrily, pointing her crooked finger at Kingsley. Kingsley wisely chose not to respond as the old Healer turned to Angelina and Harry. "Ah," she continued. "You're awake then..."

Harry didn't respond, as the effort of doing so had become too much. The old Healer moved quickly over to him and then, without waiting for his approval, unstopped a vial of red potion and poured it back down his throat. As he swallowed, Harry scowled - it tasted foul, bitter and tangy.

"What was that?" he managed.

"A replenishing potion," Madam Shaw said. "One of many. Be prepared, Mr. Potter, we have eleven more vials to go."

Harry sighed and closed his tired eyes. "Call me, Harry," he whispered.

"Here we go then, Harry," she said and poured another potion into his mouth. This one didn't taste of anything, thankfully, and Harry thought it may have been water. "Are you getting this, Angelina? That was the bone strengthening mix."

"Uh-huh," Angelina nodded, her quill scribbling clear and concise lines of ink across the page.

"Okay..." Madam Shaw continued. "This is the final dosage of infection destroying potion. Merlin knows what you could have caught on that island, Mr. Potter."

"Har-" Harry began, but was cut off as another foul tasting potion was forced down his throat. He simply did not have the strength to fight this elderly woman.

"Pain numbing..." Madam Shaw mumbled. "This potion will help with the pain for the next few days," she explained. "There may be some discomfort in that right shoulder of yours. It's a god-awful mess. You never gave the wound there a chance to heal."

Harry just nodded distractedly and swallowed the potion, his stomach churning uncomfortably as he did. He hadn't looked at his mangled right shoulder in about a week - and wasn't looking forward to seeing the scar tissue he knew would be there.

Over the next ten minutes, Madam Shaw administered at least another half a dozen disgusting potions, and Harry gave up counting after a while. Although, he did feel remarkably stronger and more able after drinking the last one, and he thought the replenishing potions must be kicking in. He knew better than to try and stand up though.

"How long will it be before I can use my hands again?" he asked, a lot louder than anything he'd said so far. There was a bit of colour coming back into his cheeks as well.

Madam Shaw glanced expertly down at his bandaged hands. "The salve and potions should do their job by this time tomorrow, the same with your ribs. Unfortunately, we couldn't heal them instantly because your hands and wrist were not set in time - had we tried, we may have repaired the bones out of alignment. You waited too long to have a Healer see to them," she said, rather crossly.

"Sorry," Harry shrugged. "But you see, I couldn't find a Healer on Azkaban, and when it collapsed-"

Kingsley, across the room, cleared his throat loudly and pointedly. "Please do not speak of those events to civilians, Mr. Potter," he said quietly.

Harry just shrugged indifferently. "Okay...." he replied.

Harry's strength was returning fast now that the potions were in his system. Slowly, but surely he became more alert - and less lethargic. The heavy feeling of drowsiness that had settled on him like a smothering blanket when he had first awoke was falling away. He slowly bent his legs at the knees because they were tingling with disuse, and was again satisfied with the series of clicks and bone popping cracks as his legs moved.

"So..." he said, glancing at Kingsley. "What's happening out there?"

"Excuse me?"

"What's Voldemort up to?" he asked simply, and frowned when Angelina and Madam Shaw gasped in fear.

"I don't know," Kingsley replied, shaking his head. "Although since... Azkaban... there have been no Death Eater attacks anywhere across the United Kingdom."

Harry nodded. "That's good," he said.

"It's unusual," Kingsley said thoughtfully.

Glancing at the wand Kingsley held in his hand, Harry wondered what had happened to his new wand. *Cedric had it on Azkaban*, he thought. *Did it fall with him when the fortress crumbled...?* He supposed he'd find out about that later.

"Well you seem to be healing nicely now," Madam Shaw said, moving her hand towards his forehead - to take his temperature.

Angelina opened her mouth to protest but it was too late. She expected Madam Shaw to pull her hand away, as if stung, but she just pressed the back of her hand against his skin, even briefly touching the scar. "You don't have a fever, Mr. Potter..." she mumbled, again seemingly talking to herself. "You're definitely a survivor - you were barely breathing when they brought you in on Sunday."

"Who brought me in?"



"Albus Dumbledore and a man with a sword strapped to his belt. They portkeyed right into the emergency ward, with you hanging between their arms. You were just the first of many that afternoon though." As Madam Shaw said this she got up to leave, and Angelina did as well.

"Am I good to go then?" he asked.

Madam Shaw frowned. "Of course not," she said. "I'll be in to check on you several times this morning and probably this afternoon. We can talk about discharging you later - give those potions some time to do their work."

"Okay," Harry said, leaning back contently against the comfy bed. "Thank you. Goodbye, Angelina."

Angelina smiled and waved as she left, and Kingsley nodded his goodbye - a respectful nod, the kind only those who had seen war could understand. A grave respect. Kingsley closed the door behind him and Harry turned to stare out of the window. With a sigh, he struggled to remember the last time he had stopped to catch his breath like this. It had been one hell of a rollercoaster ride ever since he was thrown into this universe three and a half weeks ago.

*Has it almost been a month!?* he thought with amazement. It only felt like a handful of days, at the most. He remembered the attack on Hogwarts had been last week, and then there was that Wizengamot rubbish... *A month... only five left if this other equinox works like the first - September 22<sup>nd</sup>.*

Knowing what it could cost creating the gateway between worlds, Harry shuddered to think what would happen if something went wrong. He'd had no idea what he was doing when he'd jumped into the one created by Voldemort in his own world. He would have still done it, even if he had known, but the cost and consequences of dabbling in such magic were astronomical. It could destroy worlds.

*And that Guardian,* Harry thought angrily, thinking of the spinning light he had met in the void. *Bastard sent me to this other world... he had no right.*

Harry's thoughts were interrupted then though, as he realised he hadn't been to the toilet in at least four days, and his need came strong then. "Damn..." he breathed, and was then thankful for the potions as he had the strength to swing his legs slowly off the bed and pull himself slowly to his feet.

The clean hospital tile was cold on his bare feet as he limped and ached his way over to the bathroom across the room. He looked out of the window properly as he past, and saw a busy London street filled with cars and beyond that he could see the Thames glittering in the sunlight.

Thankfully the bathroom door was open, as Harry couldn't turn a doorknob with both his hands bandaged completely - but as soon as he realised this he came across another problem. He found the toilet all right, but then clicked his teeth thoughtfully - looking from the zipper on his pants, to the toilet and then finally to his bandaged hands. The situation just turned dire.

"Bugger..." he said.

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Angelina Johnson walked uncomfortably next to Madam Shaw, briefly checking over the notes she had written a moment ago. Her eyes scanned the page and she nodded as she recognised her untidy scrawl. Everything was fine with the notes until she got halfway down the scroll of parchment, and she gasped.

There, clear as day, in her own handwriting, was a rough lightning bolt drawn next to four words she did not remember writing. *Guardian... Boundary... Broken... End...* Shaking her head, as if to rid herself of a dream, Angelina struggled to recall writing those words, or drawing that sketch of Harry's scar.

She could not remember doing any of it though, even though the evidence was staring her in the face. She quickly rolled up the leaf of parchment and placed it in her robes pocket. "Madam Shaw..." she said quietly.

"Yes, dear?"

The two of them entered the large ward and headed over to Madam Shaw's office. "Did you... did you feel anything strange happen while we were in that room?" Angelina managed.

"Strange...? No, Angelina. And please don't talk about anything to do with that room. You know we could both be in trouble if you do."

Angelina fell silent, but her mind screamed for an explanation - sadly, she would never get one.

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Harry frowned at his beaten and utterly exhausted looking face in the mirror. His green eyes appeared haunted, sunken, and pale. His cheekbones appeared the same way, giving his entire face a thin look. A few days worth of hair had also grown across his chin and cheeks and Harry thought he looked like he'd spent some time in Azkaban.

*I look sick*, he thought, trying to turn on the tap for a drink of water with his right forearm. Struggling for a minute or so, Harry finally ducked his head under the tap and swallowed a few mouthfuls of cool, clear liquid. He looked back up to the mirror and brushed some of his hair away from his forehead, so he could get a look at the scar.

Apart from one brief stab of pain in Dumbledore's office a day after he had arrived in this world, Harry hadn't felt his scar react to anything at all. No burning, no pain, no bursting and bleeding down his face. He had been, for the most part, completely unaware it was there. Well, he knew it was there - but only if he reached up and felt the jagged line of skin there.

For a moment then Harry realised his head, these past few weeks, had never felt so clear - not in his entire life. A whole universe separated him from the Voldemort who had created this scar, and linked them together, and it appeared the magic there could not penetrate that. His head felt remarkably clear, light... free. It felt as if he had carried a heavy weight around his whole life, and now that it was gone he knew what it was to feel normal.

*Probably won't last*, he told himself. *Relief never does for me.*

Ever so gently, Harry ran his left forearm up and across his wounded right shoulder. There was no pain, thankfully, but it did feel irregular - twisted maybe. *That'll be a really good scar*, he thought, and turned to walk out of the bathroom.

Back in his room, Harry fell quickly onto his bed with a tired sigh. Despite the energy the potions had given him, he knew better than to overdo it. Three weeks of constant stress, pain and magic use had taken its toll, and had nearly killed him in Azkaban. So he pulled his cover up and over himself and closed his eyes. It didn't take long, as the room was completely silent.

After ten minutes or so, Harry fell into a deep sleep, and unbeknownst to him - no sooner had he fallen asleep than his scar began to burn viciously. He couldn't feel it though, wouldn't feel it. Magic had other plans, and as insignificant as this brief burst of heat from Harry's scar may seem now, one day soon it will be all that matters across every universe.

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Several hours alter, late in the afternoon of that lazy Wednesday, Harry slowly awoke to someone gently tapping his left shoulder. His first instinct was to raise his arm in defence, but then he heard a familiar voice and relaxed.

"Harry," Lily Potter said. "Wake up, dear."

Harry yawned as the world came into focus and he saw his parents, a version of them anyway, standing above his bed and smiling. Lily's eyes were wrung with tears, and James seemed a little worse for the wear - with a few healing cuts on his face and arms.

"Hey..." he said, pulling himself up and leaning against the back board of the bed. "What time is it?"

James's eyes quickly fell to his watch. "Half three," he said. "Sorry to wake you, Harry, but the Minister wanted to see you around four - and some things can't wait."

Harry nodded with understanding. Important things were happening now that the Dark Lord had begun to lose his war.

"How are you, Harry?" Lily asked, sitting down next to him on the bed and enveloping him in a tight hug.

Harry didn't really respond to this show of affection, he just mumbled his usual response, "I'm fine..." and looked to James for help.

"I want to thank you, Harry," he said sincerely when he had pulled Lily off him. "For what you did on Sunday. Melissa would be... wouldn't be here if you didn't do what you did."

"It's okay..." Harry croaked, his voice breaking in mid sentence. "Can I... can I get a glass of water?"

"Sure," Lily said, and headed over to the bathroom.

While she was gone, James removed a familiar wand from within his robes pocket, and placed it next to Harry. "Your wand," he said with a mischievous wink. "I suppose it isn't a good thing that I managed to sneak it past the Aurors outside, but just keep it near for protection. Dermas picked it up off of Azkaban before it fell."

"I've got my wandless magic," he said, but that was no good to him with his bandaged hands - nor was the wand, come to think of it. He had a few spells in his thought magic arsenal though. "I'll be 'right."

James shrugged and his face turned dark. He leaned in closer to Harry as Lily turned on the tap in the bathroom, after conjuring a glass. "Just be careful," James whispered. "Voldemort's put a price on your head... literally."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked, although his mind had already formulated a fairly accurate guess.

"Seven million galleons," James whispered. "For the person who delivers your head to him. It's the largest bounty ever placed in known history. It's more than enough to entice every bounty hunter and freelance hitwizard on the planet...."

Harry's eyes sparkled with power and fire. Determination, the scent of a challenge. "If they want my head they'll have to get near me. We'll see what happens..."

"A friend in the Auror department told me... and Lily doesn't know," James whispered to Harry as he heard footsteps approaching behind him from across the room. "Let's keep it that way."

"Here we go," Lily said kindly, squeezing James' shoulder as she stopped by his side, and handed Harry the glass of water.

"Thanks," he replied, and carefully brushed his wand underneath his pillow. Harry drank the water in three gulps, and his throat thanked him for it. "How's Melissa?" he asked, once he'd placed the glass on his bedside table.

"Oh she's a little shook up," James said, pulling up two chairs from against the wall for Lily and himself. "I think she trusts you now, after a bit of a rough start."

"You noticed that then?" Harry asked.

"It was hard for her," Lily said, looking at Harry with eyes that so matched his own. "She mourned your death - we all did. You appearing, and being so powerful... was just difficult."

"I understand," Harry nodded, resting a bandaged hand on his stomach. "And Michael?"

James laughed suddenly and Lily turned to scowl at him, which shut him up quickly. "Michael's fine," Lily then said. "He just got into a bit of trouble on Monday."

James laughed again and not even Lily's scowl could stop it this time. "What happened?" Harry asked, remembering the black eye a group of fourth year Slytherins had given him the other week. *Had he been hurt...?*

"Sirius had to speak to him because he used some rather advanced magic on a group of Slytherins," James said, tears of mirth in his

eyes. "They approached him down on the grounds, a gang of older students and... well let's just say Michael isn't a pushover."

"What did he do?" Harry asked, although he could hazard a guess.

"With one spell he blew three of them thirty feet through the air and into the lake," James managed, before laughing again. "Sirius, as his head of house, didn't know whether to reward him or punish him."

Harry smiled, remembering the spell he had taught Michael. There was also a knowing glint in both Lily's and James' eyes. "Must have been quite a bit of power behind that spell," he said.

"You should have seen old Snape," James continued. "He-"

"Severus wasn't happy," Lily said, shaking her head. "He gave Michael a week of detentions, as Sirius had awarded him twenty house points."

Harry laughed now, and Lily gave him scowl to match the one James had cowered under. "I think he was angrier at the fact that a second year Gryffindor managed to beat three fifth year Slytherins - who are on the duelling team," James said thoughtfully.

"There's still the question of where he learnt that spell though," Lily said, glancing pointedly at Harry. "And whether he learnt any more like it..."

"I'm sure he didn't," Harry said, shrugging indifferently.

Harry, James and Lily spoke together for about another ten minutes. For the most part they talked about meaningless, happy things. Like the Quidditch game that James still had planned against the victorious Gryffindor league winning team. It would take place in a couple of weeks, if Harry was feeling up to it, near the end of that school year.

They didn't talk about Voldemort and the war, as there wasn't much to say. The news that Voldemort had put a price on his head didn't scare Harry. It was no different than having dark wizards after him, like the Death Eaters. He'd just have to keep up constant vigilance.

It had just gone four o'clock when Kingsley Shacklebolt opened the door and walked into the room, accompanied by six other white robed Aurors and Bartemius Crouch Senior, the Minister for Magic. As Harry's eyes fell upon him he remembered his final minutes on Azkaban, specifically when he had shoved a Portkey down Crouch junior's throat and sent him into a Ministry holding cell.

Harry's first impression of Crouch was that the Minister looked extremely tired and old, although his clothes were still immaculately professional, as was his hair. His Auror guard spread themselves strategically around the room, and as he entered Crouch offered Harry, James and Lily a tired nod.

"Good day, Mr. Potter," he said emotionlessly. "James, Lily."

"Minister," James said, as Lily smiled warmly.

Crouch swept across the room and came to a stop at the foot of Harry's bed as Kingsley closed the door to the room. "It's good to see you up and well, Harry," he said, somewhat kindly.

"Thanks," Harry replied, still unsure how the Minister felt about his son's incarceration. There was no way he could not know, being the Minister, but was he as foolish as the Crouch of his own world - would he dare try and get him out of prison. It may be easier now that he wasn't imprisoned in Azkaban.

"The Ministry and the Wizarding world owes you a debt it can scarcely repay, Mr. Potter," Crouch continued, smiling slightly now. "You showed us the traitors in our Auror ranks, and captured some valuable Death Eaters. What's more you saved the lives of twenty good Aurors."

"It's okay..." Harry said.

"It was a display of heroics this world rarely sees these days," Crouch continued. "As was your duel with... Lord Voldemort."

Harry nodded. "I didn't do it all alone," he said. "I had some help in Azkaban."



"Yes..." Crouch mumbled. "I have been briefed about what occurred there - by your father and Mr. Dermas Trask. The Ministry and Wizengamot have decided to award the three of you with the Order of Merlin, Second Class. It's the least we can do."

"Cedric Diggory was on that island with us as well," Harry whispered, his eyes flashing with some indescribable emotion... pain perhaps. "He deserves that more."

An Auror brought Crouch a seat over and he sat down on the opposite side of Harry's bed to James and Lily. "Yes I know," the Minister said. "Auror Diggory gave his life in the line of duty, even though he could have Portkeyed out of there. He's been awarded the Order of Merlin, First Class - honoured posthumously. Sadly, since his family was killed years ago it will only be remembered on the memorial wall...."

"It's the thought that counts," said Lily.

"Indeed," the Minister said, smiling happily. It only lasted for a moment though, and then Crouch sat up in his chair and his face took on a serious demeanour. He turned to Harry and for one brief moment Harry knew why Crouch made such a good politician. His face was completely unreadable, his eyes gave away nothing.

Harry respected this man to a level though. He had led the British Wizarding world through two decades of war - and the strain of that had to be immense. Leading a war as the world watched from the sidelines, keeping their heads down in case Voldemort happened to look their way, would not be an easy thing to do.

"We have more serious matters to discuss though, Mr. Potter," Crouch continued. "Pertaining to this war, and your position in it."

"I'm here to kill Voldemort," Harry said simply. There was no lie in his eyes, and Crouch saw this. "And any of his servants that get in my way."

"According to our sources, Mr. Potter," Crouch said. "You-Know-Who has gone into hiding. He has retreated to the safety of his fortress,

which we have been unable to find this last decade. I doubt you'll get a chance to duel him again."

Harry nodded slowly, but his mind was already coming up with solutions. "You have many Death Eaters in holding cells, don't you?" he asked.

"We do," Crouch agreed. "Awaiting transfer to the French prison Nabakza at the end of the month."

"Well one of them is Voldemort's son... who else would know the location to this fortress."

Crouch shook his head. "That boy is one of the few who is immune to Veritaserum. He's not talking. What do you intend to do for the next few days, Harry?"

Harry shrugged. "Not sure," he said. "Probably be getting out of here soon, and then I'm going to have a few days rest. The war can wait that long."

"The award ceremony for the Order of Merlin will be held this Saturday in the Atrium of the Ministry, as is tradition for the Auror corps. You've been made an honorary member of the corps, by the way," Crouch said. "All of its resources are at your disposable. The Ministry is throwing its full weight behind you, Harry, to keep you alive."

Harry nodded his thanks. "Well I'll be returning to Hogwarts soon," he then said. "As soon as I get out of here - so if you need me I'll be there."

The Minister nodded, and then stood up after glancing at his pocket watch. "I don't suppose you would mind giving a few interviews to the *Prophet*, would you?" he asked. "It will help moral a lot all around this country, and may take the pressure off of me. Ever since it got out that my son was a... ere.... well, well you know all about that."

Harry nodded but didn't say anything about Barty Crouch Jr. "I'd be happy to talk to a few reporters," he said, and didn't miss Crouch's relieved smile. "As long as it's not Rita Skeeter."

James smiled and laughed slightly at that. "That woman's a menace," he said.

"Yes..." Crouch said thoughtfully. "We'll arrange something in a few days, after you've had a chance to rest."

"Okay."

Crouch nodded and then walked over to the door. Three Aurors went ahead of him, as the other three remained stationary for a few more moments. As Crouch reached the door, he turned again and looked at Harry.

"I'd like to thank you again, Mr. Potter," he began. "Not as the Minister of Magic, but as a citizen of this world. You've managed to achieve in a few days, what we've been trying to do for fifteen years. Thank you."

Harry nodded silently as the Minister and his Auror guard swept out of the room after saying a brief goodbye. When they were gone, Harry turned to talk to James and Lily about recent developments, but his mind was now on getting out of this hospital, and back into the swing of things. He planned to start winning this war, now that he had won them an advantage.

Forces were now in play on both sides. Azkaban had been just one move on both sides of the chessboard. A lot more trouble was on the horizon, and Harry was speeding towards it faster than any of them could have predicted at that point. And it was no longer just Voldemort and the Death Eaters he had to worry about. No, dark wizards around the globe knew about the price on his head - and many were already on their way to the United Kingdom.

Time, as it had a way of doing, was running out fast for Harry. Many moves would be made over the coming weeks, and not all of them on the battlefield. Lives were still on the line though, and Harry knew that many of them may not live to see a new tomorrow.

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## Chapter 13 - The Worlds We Live In

*Don't wish me happiness - I don't expect to be happy...  
It's gotten beyond that somehow. Wish me courage and  
strength and a sense of humour - I will need them all.*

*~~Anne Morrow Lindbergh*

*The hardest thing about this life, is having to live it.*

"And for outstanding courage against the forces of darkness, and against insurmountable odds and adversity, it is an honour to award Harry James Potter the Order of Merlin, Second Class."

*Remember that, even if you remember nothing else...*

A round of applause rocked the crowded atrium of the Ministry of Magic, as Harry limped up to the podium situated in front of the fountain of magical brethren and was decorated with his silver medallion. He had to lower his head slightly as Crouch slipped the fine silk ribbon over his head and set it to rest around his neck, but then he was shaking the Minister's hand as a hundred cameras all flashed simultaneously.

He offered the crowd a brief, fake smile - as a real smile was a rare thing of the past - and then walked back over to his fine backed chair, sitting down next to Dermas Trask, who was adorned with a similar silver medallion around his own neck. The Minister had begun to speak again, and was making gestures with his hand towards Harry, but he wasn't really listening.

Harry looked down to the circular piece of pure silver that hung from his neck, felt the cool weight of it against his chest, and then picked it up tightly in his right hand to get a good look at it. The silver surface - which depicted the emblem of the Ministry - reflected the torchlight in the atrium and twinkled in Harry's eyes. Turning it over, he read the inscription on the back, as the crowd of Aurors, civilians, Ministry personnel, reporters... whoever was here... all applauded something Crouch had just said.

The inscription on the medallion read:

Harry

James

Potter

*Order of Merlin, Second Class*

*For exemplary service in the field of war  
April 15<sup>th</sup>, 1997*

The cameras flashed again and Harry looked up briefly to behold the sea of faces all clapping for him once again. *Funny* he thought with a humourless shrug, *I kill people and they honour me... I kill Death Eaters to save Aurors and they honour me... I've killed pretty much anyone who has stood against me... and these people admire that?*

Harry gazed past the crowds and beyond the atrium with its finely decorated walls and enchanted ceilings, and looked back into his life and saw nothing more than death. His parents - *my real parents*, he thought, *not the man sitting next to me* - Cedric... *twice*... Sirius, Ethan, the Dursleys. All of them casualties of war who suffered because Harry wasn't strong enough to change their fates, or so he believed.

"Two decades we have been fighting this war," Crouch continued. "Two long decades of loss and personal heartache. I doubt that there is a single man or woman within these walls who has not been affected by loss in some way during that time.... Hope has been born though, and it comes to us on the backs of these brave individuals, who have accomplished more than we ever thought possible a mere week ago."

*Again, a round of applause.*

"The balance of power has been turned in favour of the light," said Crouch, to a silent, hopeful crowd. "Our world will soon be free of the dark menace that has plagued it for so long. He Who Must Not Be Named, Lord Voldemort, will know justice for his crimes - for his atrocities - as a special squad of our nation's best will be formed, under the command of Harry James Potter, to seek out and destroy evil at its source. So with that... Ladies and Gentlemen, it is with great pleasure and pride, that I give you, Commander Harry Potter."

Harry had known it was coming, had known ever since his meeting with Crouch a day ago after he had been released from St. Mungo's.

There had been few protests to giving him command of this squad, as by now the world knew of his heroics both at Hogwarts and Azkaban, and no one doubted his power, but some believed him to be too young for such a position. The Minister had used his position to override these concerns and complaints - he, at least, saw reason.

As he rose to the podium to present the small speech he had been obliged to prepare, Harry was momentarily blinded from the flashes of light, as he recalled briefly that meeting with Crouch....

*"The Ministry will place its full resources at your disposal, should you choose to accept this responsibility, and fight for an end to this war," Bartemius Crouch said, offering to refill Harry's tea cup from across his large and expensive desk.*

*"Let me get this straight," Harry said calmly, waving away the tea. "You want me to lead a group of wizards and witches - the best - and take the fight to Voldemort. You're giving me full command of Ministry resources to find and kill him, is that right?"*

*Crouch's face showed no emotion - nothing, and when he answered he was as honest as he could have been. Harry knew they were way beyond the normal pleasantries and formalities that usually accompanied most situations, so Crouch's answer did not faze him.*

*"Yes, Mr. Potter," the Minister replied. "You have the strength, and I believe the will and desire to defeat the Dark Lord. We, of course, would like to see that happen... and seeing as how we have failed to achieve that in nearly twenty years of war, we are willing to try anything - even employing someone who hasn't even passed their NEWTs."*

*Harry nodded. "If I do this... I'll have complete control? Money, people... everything?"*

*"You will submit reports to me on your progress once a week, or whenever you deem necessary, but other than that... you're a separate force to the Auror division, and to Dumbledore's Order of the Phoenix - although you may recruit from these divisions. A group... which will operate in secret for the most part... but your main*

*objective would be to find and eliminate the threat to our world at its source."*

*"Voldemort..." Harry breathed, removing his glasses and rubbing his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. "I'll do it."*

"Good evening," Harry began quietly, staring out into the crowd. "Nothing I can say here tonight will matter much in the long run, so I'll keep it brief...." Utter silence reined as every one of them - over five hundred magical people - hung on his every word. "This war... this quarrel over the purity of blood... has gone on for far too long. I aim to put a stop to it now, not in the distant future - but soon. Those of you with children at Hogwarts, or growing up at home, just know that they'll never have to face war like we all have. It's going to end... thank you."

No sound followed Harry's slow footsteps back to his chair, until slowly a quiet clap rang out from somewhere in the crowd, and was quickly joined by another and another, until the entire population of the atrium were roaring their approval. James clapped Harry on the shoulder as he sat down, and the Minister returned to the enchanted podium.

"Short but to the point, well done," James said.

"There's a lot to do," Harry replied, nodding to people who he recognised in the Auror lines. Kingsley... Tonks... Remus.... "And I've only got a few months to do it, before I head back."

James sighed. "You... you could stay," he whispered. "We'd be more than happy to have you."

*Could I? Harry wondered. Could I really abandon the real fight? Let my own world deal with it... on their own... NEVER!*

"Sorry, James," Harry managed. "I've caused too much damage in that universe. I've got to do what I can to fix it."

"Why you?"

"Who else...?"

\*\*\*\*

In war... in life... it is usually the innocent who tragically pay the ultimate price for the ambition of those with power. Great battles can be fought across many fields, within the walls of cities, or on the grounds of ancient castles. *A thousand different places*. Usually, wherever the location, innocent life is sacrificed for what may or may not be the greater good.

Collateral damage; is the term given to this loss of life most often during military conflicts. Bitterly funny really... two words used to describe the end of a life, or lives. People who had families, friends, jobs, dreams... ambitions of their own, categorised in two words. Referenced, even. They become nothing more than a memory, or a name on a slab of dark and cold stone.

War always breeds collateral damage. It is unavoidable, as certain as the need for air. One side of the conflict has to be completely prepared to see humanity at its worst, to see the destruction left in the wake of a battle - where the collateral damage is high. Preparation is the key, some semblance of control over an uncontrollable situation. A man who has the job of categorising the dead - a group of men and women maybe - are the first line into the field after the battle...

They are the ones who see the carnage left in the wake of war. The ones who see the field after the fight and realise war has no real winner, only survivors who are haunted by memories of distant frontiers and other days of equal bloodshed. They see the price paid for peace, and wonder if it was too high.

These people are always ready - always willing - to face the next massacre. And in the magical world, after twenty years of war, they respond quickly and expertly. No matter what the situation, they'll be there to do their jobs.

So that is why when the bomb of raw magical energy exploded in a torrent of searing heat and blood red flames in Trafalgar Square, the Ministry of Magic was on the scene within ten minutes of the detonation - its group of damage controlling witches and wizards securing the site and clearing away the devastation.



Our own hero also arrived on the scene of destruction soon after that. Harry stood atop of an ash covered and broken stone column riddled set of stairs above the horror that this Muggle square had become in only one brief moment of time. *Damn you, Voldemort* he thought, as his mind painted a fairly accurate picture of what had happened.

People - both magical and Muggle alike - ran past him on the stairs, and lights of emergency service vehicles and fire were reflected in Harry's emerald green eyes. Screams of the dying or wounded reached his ears and the acrid smell of burning filled his nostrils. Harry took another emotionless look around the once proud square, and he knew that this was a message for him.

*Hundreds, maybe even a thousand people walked quickly and with purpose around Trafalgar Square - in the heart of London and through its central business district. It hummed with early morning life. Children threw seed and fatty chips to the pigeons which, on a good day, outnumbered the humans who occupied the Square. Street performers and tour guides led crowds around with their antics, and a large number of the soon to be victims were just admiring the sights and sounds of the famous tourist attraction.*

*Nelson's Column - a large stone tower of sorts that stands one hundred and eighty five feet high, complete with a seventeen foot high statue of Admiral Nelson himself. A great British war hero, who fought valiantly for his country up until his death in battle off the Spanish coast of Trafalgar, where he defeated Napoleon and the French and Spanish fleets. This column stands proudly in Trafalgar Square, a monument to sacrifice.*

*The massive column is decorated at the top with Acanthus leaves, cast from British cannons, and at the base are four bronze relief panels - cast from armaments captured from the French. These panels depict the four great victories of Admiral Nelson. Finally, at the four corners of the monument sit four great lions, cast in bronze.*

*This monument is what most tourists to the Square come to see when they visit London. They admire its beauty and craftsmanship - sometimes stand in awe of it, and the reasons for its existence.*

*Today though, Nelson's column held a dark secret - ticking away at its base, hidden simply beneath an invisibility cloak.*

*Monday, April 17<sup>th</sup> 1997. A day that would be remembered for years in this time, in this world, within this universe. A day hundreds died for the pointless attention of one teenage boy, who has a destiny far beyond comprehension or thought, and who his locked in an eternal struggle against the forces of darkness.*

*The clock tower, Big Ben, chimed with its age old tone as the minute hand clicked onto the twelve, announcing the arrival of the new hour. It could be heard from Trafalgar Square.*

*DONG!*

*Nine chimes left and then the world would be irrevocably changed forever.*

*DONG!*

*The birds, as if having some innate sense suddenly began to take flight from Trafalgar Square. It was as if they could sense the coming destruction - feel the tension in the air.*

*DONG!*

*The clock strikes three....*

*DONG!*

*Four is one more.*

*DONG!*

*Five and everyone is still alive.*

*DONG!*

*Six, the Devil and his tricks.*

*DONG!*

*Seven, do you believe in heaven?*

*DONG!*

*Eight... Death will not wait.*

*DONG!*

*Nine, it is now time.*

*DONG!*

*Ten... if only we could start over again.*

*BOOM!*

*Precisely as Big Ben strikes ten o'clock, three hundred and twelve lives are ended as the bomb, hidden in plain sight, explodes at the base of Nelson's column. A magical device, this bomb was packed with enough pure energy to disintegrate anything within two hundred and fifty feet.*

*The first one hundred and fifty feet of the impressive column, which had stood for over one hundred years, simply dissolves into dust, and the remaining thirty feet, complete with a statue of Admiral Nelson, begins a fast fall to the now scarred ground of Trafalgar Square.*

*The explosion itself is devastating, as the magic expands and pulsates - destroying life. Red fire is writhed in this destruction, destroying concrete and stone, ending innocent life. An entire tour group of over fifty people is engulfed within these searing hot flames, and later their charred corpses would be found fused into one ashy lump.*

*Shock followed the initial explosion, which to onlookers one mile away was nothing more than a brief flash of intense red light, followed by a wave of power that knocked them from their feet. A MILE AWAY! Windows in the surrounding buildings for up to half a mile were shattered and cracked, glass falling like rain upon the streets of London. Those unfortunate enough not to have been killed in the explosion, but were still in the square - were thrown high into the air*

*or sent tumbling against the concrete... painful deaths, as magic tore limbs from bodies.*

*Debris was scattered in an almost symmetrical circle from the base of Nelson's column, which was gone, and many birds that had not been fortunate enough to fly away quickly now fell from the sky as burning balls of feathers.*

*Seven seconds after all of this happened, the top of Nelson's column, complete with his statue, hit the devastated ground around where it had stood for generations. The thirty feet of rock it was connected to splintered, cracked and was propelled in every direction as dangerous heavy shrapnel. If this served any purpose, it was to cushion the blow for the statue, which miraculously survived unscathed, and now stood defiantly in the ruins of the column it had been perched on before. Admiral Nelson stood on a field of war again, the dying around him and the flames licking at his bronze heels.*

*Screams of pain, fear, shock and uncertainty followed this cowardly attack. People, survivors, fled in every direction away from the ill-fated Trafalgar Square. Some found refuge in the church of St. Martins, which hung on the outskirts of the Square, and had been littered with large pieces of rock and debris from the explosion.*

*Many others found a safe haven in the National Art Gallery across from what was once Nelson's column. This gallery held one of the world's richest collections of paintings, and its curator was currently screaming on the phone to the Muggle authorities, as bleeding and broken survivors dragged themselves or others into the sanctuary his gallery had become.*

*No sooner had the chaos abated, than did a cool and entirely evil cackle sound out through Trafalgar Square and Greater London. It sent fear into the hearts of any who heard it, and eyewitnesses would later claim that the laughter emanated from a glowing green skull that hung in the air eerily.*

*Innocent men, women, and children lost their lives within those first few seconds after the clock struck ten. Casualties of a war they did not even know was being fought, or ever would know. Heroes in their own right, losses to a cause. Fire spread quickly throughout the*

*Square and surrounding buildings, and soon a thick black smoke heavy with ash filled the air.*

*Burst pipes and water sources helped to quell some of the blaze, but the magical heat from the bomb lingered and this was unquenchable fuel for fire. Bodies burnt, more fell, and everyone was left wondering why.*

*The Muggles would never know the truth about what happened here, and is it best they should not? Whether or not they know was of little importance to the secluded society of magical folk, who fear the meaning of that glowing green skull, and who were as of right now only just learning of the attack. Nothing was certain anymore to these people, or any others, except for one thing....*

*The world had become a darker place at ten o'clock that morning, Trafalgar Square had been razed to the ground, hundreds had died, and it was all to send a message to one teenage boy.*

For a moment, all Harry Potter could do was stare at the destruction around him. Nothing could have pulled his eyes away from the corpses or flames that littered this once busy place. His unblinking and slightly glazed eyes examined the wreckage in all its horrid and gruesome detail. Members of Harry's fast forming squad stood around him in equal disbelief that humanity could be so cruel, none of them said anything. There was nothing to say.

*You think I'd be use to death by now,* Harry thought, as he took the first step down the steps that were covered with ash and debris. He blinked once on his descent, and in that moment wished that he could be anyone else.... be *anywhere* else. He walked past Muggle emergency service personnel, who took a brief cursory glance at him before shrugging and continuing on with their jobs - whatever they had to do.

Harry didn't have to fear being asked any questions or being stopped by the Muggles. His Charms expert had cast excellent Muggle repelling and confusing spells before they had left Hogwarts. All of the Ministry and magical folk here would have some sort of disguise if they were going to walk through a Muggle inhabited magical disaster area.

The members of his squad fanned out around him silently, each one here to collect evidence or heal any wounded they came across. It had only been ten minutes since the explosion, there was a good chance that on an area of ground this size - there were still people dying.

Smoke blew into and around Harry and it made his throat sore and his eyes sting, but he couldn't do anything about it. Glass shards cracked under his dragon hide boots as he took slow steps across Trafalgar Square. He could still hear sirens in the distance and see flashing lights through the smoke but this didn't bother him.

As was his way, he squeezed his right wrist slightly and felt the wand there still secured in its new holster. Briefly he realised he still needed to purchase several items from Diagon Alley. Definitely a job for another day, another time.

Passing the dry, scorched and cracked fountain in the centre of the Square - that had been bubbling with water only a quarter of an hour ago - Harry came across a body that was, under the circumstances, in fairly good condition. Although whoever it was wasn't moving, and lifeless eyes stared up at Harry from where she lay against the wall of the fountain. Just to be sure, Harry pressed his fingers into the young woman's neck.... she was still warm, but there was no pulse.

A single tear, a rare thing for Harry, worked its way through the coarse unshaven stubble on his face as he beheld two lifeless bodies - both children - and continued on to where he knew Nelson's column had stood only a short time ago. Ash was clinging to his white robes, which were now dirty, and it stuck to his hair. Sighing, Harry cast a quick cooling charm as the area he was entering was blisteringly hot. He doubted anyone had been this close to the column yet.

*Just another day*, he thought sadly, straining his eyes against the smoke that clouded his vision. He coughed once from smoke inhalation, but it was sporadic - there was no danger of doing any damage. This close to the centre of the explosion, and Harry saw unrecognizable lumps that he knew to be more corpses. He was careful not to tread on anything other than burnt ground and ash.

The heat became more intense so Harry cast a stronger cooling charm and came in time to the large piles of rock that had once stood one hundred and fifty feet above the ground. He came in time to the still standing statue of Admiral Nelson. Harry paused as he beheld the bronze man, and he could only just see his face seventeen feet above him. Having no idea who this was a statute of, Harry moved on past the statue and then found something that confirmed his worst fears.

The smell of burnt flesh was terrible and it made Harry feel sick as he approached the base of Nelson's column alone. A green glow had caught his eye though, and for a moment he thought it was another Dark Mark, but if possible it was something far worse. The large stone... steps, I suppose they could be called, that had been the foundation of the column were covered in rock and fire, but blazing defiantly green against this destruction was a hideous message - a sign that showed to Harry why these people had died today.

Green letters, written in fire, were scrawled where the bomb had sat twenty five minutes ago. Of magical design, the fire letters read:

Potter  
Resistance means Death  
But not for you... yet  
The Innocent will suffer first

Harry put one foot up on a slab of rock in front of him and rested his left forearm against his raised knee as he read this message, and he couldn't stop the scowl developing on his features. Wind blew ash around him and Harry felt anger bubbling in his chest. He felt and saw the bolts of power rippling across his skin in response to this powerful emotion.

*Control it*, he thought, *or it controls you....* Thanks to the green fire message, there was no doubt in Harry's mind to who was responsible for this atrocity, and he swore on the memory of those who had died that he would one day, somehow, rid both of his worlds of Voldemort. For he considered the world he lived in now to be real, and as such would die to protect it.

"Commander Potter," said a known voice from behind Harry, and he silently berated himself for not hearing their approach.

"What is it, Grace?" he asked, not turning around but keeping his eyes glued on the fire message. "And call me Harry, just Harry."

Grace Arnair, one of Harry's six trainers in his own world, fell silent as she read the message through the smoke and walked up to stand beside Harry. "We've healed many around the perimeter," she said slowly, her eyes flicking from Harry's to the message - trying to discern his thoughts. "And portkeyed about three dozen to St. Mungo's, unconscious of course."

"Yes?"

Grace sighed. "Most are dead," she said, brushing a strand of her long brown hair back behind her ears. "We saved as many as we could... but it's a massacre."

Suddenly, and unexpectedly, Harry raised his palm and sent a bolt of pure power into the glowing green letters scrawled onto the base of Nelson's column. His eyes blazed fury as the words were obliterated from existence, enveloped in cleansing light, and without another word Harry turned around and walked away, with Grace at his heels.

"You know," he said quietly, thoughtfully, to Grace as the two of them walked back out of the Square. Through the fire and smoke, brushing passed still falling ash and burnt corpses. "The faces are the same across any world... always the same...."

"What?"

Harry shook his head sadly, regretfully. "Never mind... I'm just rambling...."

More Muggles ran by the two of them, but they ran by without noticing either Harry or Grace. Not really watching his footing, Harry trod on the fingers of a man lying dead in his path. The ring on the man's finger told Harry more about him than he wanted to know, and suppressing a shudder he moved quickly on.



The despair of what had happened was just another memory that would live on in Harry's mind for as long as he did. It would gnaw at him in his dreams... or nightmares... whenever he managed to sleep, and as he Apparated out of what remained of Trafalgar Square with his team, he knew that his soul had died a little more, but his resolve to win this fight had hardened beyond breaking point.

\*\*\*\*

*Later* *that* *Evening*  
*Hogwarts, Room of Requirement*

"It was a show of force. Pure and simple. Targeted at you, Harry. He wanted to show you, and the world, that his grip is still strong - that he has not been defeated yet."

"Hmm...." Harry sighed, rubbing his forehead. "What do you think, Dernas?"

Harry was seated at a circular table within the room of requirement. This room at Hogwarts was serving as headquarters, the meeting place, for his squad of the best witches and wizards in the nation. It had taken Harry only a day since his Order of Merlin presentation to form this group, and they were now just getting started out in the world. Influencing power, calling in favours, searching for Voldemort's hiding place.

There were seven people at the table, Harry made eight. Starting from his left sat Dernas Trask. He was an obvious member of the team, as he knew the wizard underground well, and plenty of people owed him favours. On Dernas' left sat Grace Arnair, their Charms and intricate spell caster. To Grace's left was Sirius Black, who had been given leave from his position as Transfiguration teacher at Hogwarts - a position which Dumbledore now filled.

Sirius had been another obvious choice. His family was extremely wealthy and influential. The name Black, for good or evil, carried a lot of weight in certain circles. Sirius would be a valued member of the so far nameless team. Harry just hoped he didn't get him killed... again.

Making up the fifth member of the team, and sitting to Sirius' left, was Nymphadora Tonks. Reassigned by the Ministry, and Dumbledore's liaison with Harry's group and the Order of the Phoenix. She was currently leaning back in her chair with bubblegum pink hair and her feet up on the table. Her manner was entirely serious though, and she was a valuable fighter.

Next to her was member number six - Art Nuan. An Indian man who sported a curly goatee and dark piercing eyes that hardly ever blinked. He was a hitwizard, a wand for hire. Had he not wanted to see Voldemort dead, it was most likely that he would be one of the many bounty hunters who were after Harry's head. As such, he was good for keeping tabs on international bounties, and the locations of other hitwizards. Recommended by Trask, he apparently knew the faces of the world's best hunters - and would prove to be invaluable over the coming months. Not one to speak much, he discerned a lot from their conversations, and anything he did say was intelligent and to the point.

Number seven was another new face for Harry. A woman nearing her thirties - Sophia Tréla. She had wavy blonde hair that cascaded down her back in perfect strands and blue eyes that were nothing more than two cold chips of ice. An enticingly beautiful woman, but quick on the draw with a wand - not a person to be crossed. She was a curse breaker, and knew Knockturn Alley very well. Another link in the seedy underground where Death Eaters could hide.

Member number eight was another familiar face for Harry, although the man himself had never met Harry before. At least not in this universe. Thomas Fright - a former Auror and instructor of highly advanced curse magic and defensive spells. He was their best duellist next to Harry, and he had already scheduled practice battles for the whole team to take place sometime this week. They were supposed to be the best, and Fright wanted to see how each of their skills matched up against one another.

A short man, Fright had long dark hair that he tied back into a ponytail, which defined his face quite clearly and the stubble on his cheeks gave him a dark look. Silent for the most part, he had been one of Harry's special instructors alongside Grace Arnair earlier that year.

Harry quickly ran through all he knew of these people, whilst listening to Trask's response to the Trafalgar Square attack - something the Muggles had decided was the work of terrorists. *Magical terrorists*, Harry thought. *Just another weapon*. He decided he couldn't have chosen anyone better for this job, and just hoped now that they were up to the task.

He had thought briefly of asking Dumbledore to join his team, but with his responsibilities to more than one Wizarding law enforcement department, he had decided against it. Dumbledore may have been an extremely powerful wizard, but he was too well known and... noble... for a job like this.

"It may be the first of many," Trask said. "This attack, it killed over three hundred, but it was relatively small compared to what Voldemort could truly do. We have to be prepared for another, perhaps as soon as tomorrow."

"Who would know?"

Derms clicked his teeth together thoughtfully for a few moments before answering. "Creating a magical explosive device... it isn't simple. It's a mix of Muggle technology and raw magical energy, which is packed into the Muggle device."

"What are you saying?" asked Sirius, raising an eyebrow.

"I'm saying," continued Trask. "That Voldemort couldn't create one on his own. He would need parts... components and wizards with expertise in this field to construct another bomb."

"There would be a trail," Harry speculated. "A trail we could follow, from the supplier maybe even to Voldemort himself...."

"Exactly," Trask nodded.

"Knockturn Alley may be a good place to start, Commander," Sophia said neutrally.

Harry nodded absently, glancing briefly into Sophia's cold eyes. Despite his best efforts, he could not get her to call him Harry. She

had grown up within the French Auror military, and as such the chain of command was ingrained deeply into her character. She would ever call him by the field commission the Ministry had bestowed upon him. *Commander.*

"Go tonight, if you will, Sophia," he replied. "We need to know if there is another attack planned. I don't... no... I won't have any more Muggles suffer for our mistakes."

The group fell silent for a few moments and Harry required a glass of water and it appeared in front of him. "Well I think this issue has been exhausted," he sighed, before taking a deep drink. The glass disappeared with a thought and he said, "Any other business?"

"A team name and equipment requirements," Thomas Fright said, twirling a finger around his ponytail. "If we're going to act the part we need to look the part."

"Too true," smiled Sirius. "And the Minster has kindly given us free reign over the defence budget."

Harry nodded. "Suggestions?"

"Basic Auror survival kit... with a few modifications," Tonks said, swinging her feet off the table and sitting up straight in her chair.

"I didn't think they used those anymore," Sirius frowned. "Too expensive, not very reliable if I remember correctly, and no good in a skirmish."

Fright shook his head. "For a small force such as this one they should work well. Especially if they're outfitted with top of line gear..."

"What are they?" Harry asked.

Sirius shrugged. "Back in the early years of the war... Aurors were dying fast," he began, his eyes sinking into their sockets - taking on a haunted look that Harry found eerily familiar of the Sirius he had known in his own world. "The Ministry issued special survival kits to each and every Auror straight out of training. It was a trunk, that could

be reduced or expanded - along with its contents - and it held things such as a broom, a spare wand, money, potions... you get the idea."

"And they stopped using these?"

"It cost upwards of five hundred galleons to create one, and there are hundreds of Aurors. We found that Death Eaters would either take or destroy the kits after a fight, if they won. For a time, we were aiding the enemy and there were even a few suicide attacks on the Auror division because of it."

"What? Why?"

"Each trunk was fitted with a Portkey back into the Ministry. An amazing blunder, now that I think about it," Sirius finished, slowly shaking his head.

Harry was deep in thought at this point, and decided for the affirmative with these kits. It seemed the wisest thing to do. He didn't want to be responsible for the deaths of any of these men or women who had agreed to aid him in finding and destroying Voldemort. A means of escape, perhaps more than one, would be essential.

"I'll look into these tomorrow," Harry said. "Unless there's another attack, but I want you to look into that at Hogsmeade tonight, Dermas. Even Death Eaters drink at the Three Broomsticks, or maybe the Hog's Head, you could-"

"Harry," Sirius said carefully. "The Hog's Head was destroyed in an attack two years ago. It wasn't rebuilt."

Harry realised that every other member of his team, bar Sirius, was looking at him strangely. These people were the best at what they did, and they were all suspicious of their Commander. Nothing of his past was known, except that he had supposedly died in Diagon Alley six years ago... and yet here he was.

"I didn't know that," he said by way of explanation. It wasn't one of course, but it was all Harry would give. "Anyway... Dermas, check out Hogsmeade. Alert the Aurors if you discover anything about an attack.

Same for you as well, Sophia. The Aurors can respond faster than we can at the moment."

"Well I think that's it then," Grace said.

"We still need a team name," Art Nuan whispered. It was one of the only things he had said all evening.

"That can wait until tomorrow," Harry replied, waving his hand dismissively. "Although you can all think on it tonight."

Silently, the seven members of Harry's team got up to leave. They wished each other goodnights, happy hunting. Traded soft jokes about staying out of trouble, and then said goodbye to Harry - who had remained seated as they all departed.

"Same time tomorrow morning everyone," he said before they left. "Unless something happens before then...."

"Goodnight, Commander," Sophia Tréla said, sweeping out of the room quickly.

"Don't stay up past your bedtime," Sirius joked with a smile, attacking his age. "Lily wouldn't be happy."

Harry nodded and glanced up at the wall, just as a clock appeared. It was almost eight o'clock. Not too late, but still dark enough for Sophia and Dermas to begin their missions. "I'm having dinner with my... parents and Dumbledore at eight thirty," he replied.

After the rest of the team had said their final goodbyes and exited, Harry sighed heavily as the large table and all the other chairs disappeared, and his own chair transformed into a large and comfy armchair, much like the ones in the Gryffindor common room. Harry was unable to keep the frown off his face as the fatigue of everything that was always, always happening caught up with him.

*Today has been a long day*, he thought tiredly, running a hand through his hair. Now that he was on his own, this fatigue was the only sign of weakness he would ever show outside of this room. He

had to remain strong most other times, for the sake of all who had placed their hope in him.

The clock on the wall struck eight and Harry looked up into the emptiness of the darkened room before him. Only a faint flicker of torchlight remained glowing along the stone wall, and that was dying. Harry preferred the dark though, and didn't require the room to illuminate itself any further.

He had some time to kill before he was needed anywhere, so Harry required the room to provide him with something to read. No sooner had he thought it, did a thick text appear in his lap - *The Art of War*. Having enough light to read by, Harry slowly flicked through the pages of this book, which felt very old to him. He had asked for a book on war tactics, leadership roles... and so on. It came as a bit of a surprise that the room gave him a book written by a Muggle.

*Sun Tzu...* Harry read, returning to the cover. Vague memories surfaced as he read the title of the book again. He'd heard it somewhere before, possibly mentioned by Hermione at some point. He didn't remember much about the book, but he did recall that it had been written over two thousand years ago. He turned the pages slowly, glancing at passages of text which seemed to be highlighted, that jumped out at him from the page.

***Regard your soldiers as your children, and they will follow you into the deepest valleys; look upon them as your own beloved sons, and they will stand by you even unto death.***

***To subdue the enemy without fighting is the supreme excellence.***

***It is only one who is thoroughly acquainted with the evils of war that can thoroughly understand the profitable way of carrying it on.***

The clock struck once as the minute hand reached a quarter of an hour, and Harry snapped the book closed. *Appropriate stuff*, he thought tiredly for a moment, before standing up and walking over to the door. The book and his chair disappeared as he did.

There were a few people, Hogwarts's students, in the corridors and halls of the castle as Harry made his way up to his parent's quarters. He walked by a few Ravenclaws who stared at him in awe as he passed, but then remembered they had to make curfew at eight thirty, and quickly hurried along. Harry ignored them all - he didn't have the time for them now.

Images of the massacre that day assaulted his mind as he walked in the silence and ever growing darkness. Horrific images, bitter images. Charred and burning corpses, the man's arm with a wedding ring upon his finger. All of it came back in a continuous loop and Harry found himself shaking his head to be rid of it.

*I can't do this...* he thought, looking out of a nearby window and seeing the Hogwarts grounds. He then looked beyond that and out into a strange new world, which it seemed he was destined to save.

"Damn it," he whispered, thinking of Voldemort. Everything, every death, every loss, every moment of pain, always came back to that creature. Whether it was the Voldemort of one world or the Voldemort of another. *He* was always at the centre, inspiring chaos and creating new and effective ways of murdering innocent people.

*I have to kill him*, Harry sighed. *He has to die. But to do it more than once...? That's just unfair.*

"That's life," he said, rubbing his almost healed shoulder. Occasionally it would start to throb and go numb, which meant the circulation was failing. A few quick rubs and it was as good as new. Harry found that it was worst in the morning, when he could sleep. He'd wake up and his entire right arm would feel numb. It was a weakness, one that could cost him sooner or later. He decided he would look into medicines tomorrow, along with everything else he needed to purchase.

Dinner that night was nothing special. It was just him, Dumbledore, James and Lily. They talked little... what was there to talk about? And Harry ate little as well. He never really felt hungry that day, not after what he had seen in London that morning. The four of them discussed the war, not going into too fine a detail, and Lily thanked Harry again for going to Azkaban.



James raised the question of Quidditch again, and for a brief moment Harry longed to be back in the air on a broom, doing nothing more - worrying about nothing more - than chasing and catching that small golden ball. Dumbledore was still delighted with the idea, and suggested this mock up game between the Cup winners Gryffindor, and James' and Harry's team, could take place at the end of the month. Harry quickly agreed, and it became one of the few things he was looking forward to.

At around ten o'clock that evening, Harry headed back to Gryffindor tower, thoughts of his bed in mind. He both longed for, and dreaded going to sleep. So much had happened these last few months that Harry was constantly feeling dead on his feet, but nightmares plagued his sleeping hours and it was always hard to get rest.

That said, he was asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow up in the sixth year dormitory. He had avoided and ignored all of the stares he had received down in the common room, and as sleep took him Harry had one final thought. *I wonder what tomorrow will bring?*

His sleep was deep but, as he had expected, troubled. A strange heat filled the room as Harry slept, and none of the other sixth year boys knew where it came from. They assumed a warming charm had been cast, and left it at that. None of them could see the glowing gold scar on Harry's forehead behind his drapes, surrounding his bed. None of them could see a thing.

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Five hours was all he managed before waking in a cold sweat. Shivering in the early morning cold and rubbing his eyes of dry sleep, Harry stood up shakily on the fine carpet and grabbed his robes, shirt and jeans from the foot of his bed. In just his boxers, he made his way across the dormitory and headed into the showers across the landing.

Fifteen minutes later and Harry was silently exiting the common room. He'd had to make a quick trip back into the dormitory to fetch his dragon hide boots, and mentally made a note to get some more armour for himself and the team. His old piece of armour had saved

his life a dozen times over on the day of the final battle in his own world. It was good stuff.

By four o'clock that morning Harry was wide awake, feeling a little tired but reenergised nonetheless, and back in the Room of Requirement. He stood behind a large desk that had dozens of maps of the British Isles spread out across it haphazardly. A few long stuck candles in their holders provided light and held down the corners of some of the maps, as Harry frowned upon them and rubbed his early morning stubble, which was a few days old now as he hadn't shaved since Saturday.

"Where are you?" he asked the maps quietly, glaring from one corner of Scotland down all the way to London. "Where would you hide?"

Harry was, of course, looking hopelessly for Slytherin fortress. That was what he and his team, his squad, were created to do. Find and destroy Voldemort. Harry knew Voldemort wasn't stupid, and he knew that he would most likely never see him again outside of that fortress, wherever it was. The problem here though, was that it had been hidden for a millennium, but Harry would search anyway.

Only rumours so far had reached him from the ears of his team, and their information had come from less than reliable sources. No Death Eater had been given the location, and had only ever Apparated inside of it occasionally. They couldn't tell the Ministry, or anyone for that matter, where the fortress was located.

Ethan, the Dark Lord's spawn, hadn't been any help either. He wasn't talking. Still rotting away within a Ministry holding cell, Harry would need to speak with him soon. *I'll make him talk...* he thought. *One way or another.*

He waved his hand and one map rolled itself away as another unfolded before him. This one just a map of England, with glowing red markers to indicate magical settlements, or the location of ancient castles. There were hundreds - he'd never find it this way. *Salazar Slytherin... if I were Slytherin where would I build my fortress...?*

Pointless, he realised. It may not even be on the British Isles. Magic made the world very small. The fortress could be on the continent, or under the sea for all he knew.

"I'll find you..." Harry sighed eventually, and then required the maps and desk to disappear with a thought. He fell back into his armchair next to a fire that had just roared to life in the required fireplace.

*What am I doing...?* he thought, not for the first time. *Who am I to lead this war? Why do I have to sacrifice the lives of those under my command? Because I will, when the time comes... I'd sacrifice them all if I could take Voldemort down.*

And the truly terrible thing about these thoughts, Harry knew, was that he seriously would contemplate it if the choice arose. War had changed him from the young, wide eyed and amazed eleven year old youth that had discovered magic from a giant of a man called Hagrid, and into something much more practical - colder, efficient. A killer of the most dangerous sort. One with nothing to lose, one not allowing anything to stand between him and his goal - the death of evil.

An admirable goal, some might say, but what would they say of the path taken to achieve it... Harry's path was littered, was paved, with the bodies of his enemies, or worse his friends and family - the cement that held it together was mixed with blood. A dark path that led to a purpose stronger than the laws of life and death... of magic and faith. It would ultimately either destroy or save all worlds.

The small teenage boy who walked this path and influenced its course had no idea of these things though, and he currently sat with his head in his hands, remembering the love he and Ginny had shared in those final weeks within his own universe. It seemed like a distant memory now, a pleasure felt years ago across some vast distance which time had long since forgotten.

When Harry looked up at the clock again it had just gone five, and he knew he didn't have any more time to spend within his memories - not when a job had to be done. With a thought, he required a book, one he had seen in the library, to appear before him. It was a thick tome, entitled *The Founders: History since 950A.D.*

*I hope there's something in here,* Harry thought, opening the book to the contents page. He scanned it briefly, before turning to the parchment leaf one, of seven hundred and thirty four.

*At a time of unrest in the magical world, where magical talent ran unchecked and uneducated across the isles of Britain, the four greatest wizards and witches of the age founded the...*

Harry knew all of this, and his eyes jumped quickly from paragraph to paragraph, hunting for key words. *Fortress... Slytherin... War...* He became so engrossed within the thick text that he didn't hear the door to the Room of Requirement open and close quietly, nor did he see the two figures that approached him until their shadows were cast over the page.

"Commander Potter," Sophia Tréla said promptly, nodding respectfully to him as he stood up from his chair.

"Hey, Harry," Dermas Trask, the other person to enter the room, said. "You go to sleep at all last night?"

"Briefly..." Harry replied. "Did you two find anything? Anything at all?"

Every member of Harry's team knew the workings of the Room of Requirement, and with a few quick thoughts the three of them were once again seated around the large circular table that served as an appropriate place to conduct their meetings.

"I heard nothing of an impending attack, Commander," Sophia said professionally, her voice strong. Although Harry could see the lines around her eyes. She was tired. "Knockturn Alley was unusually quiet last night."

"Same for Hogsmeade," Dermas said. "No one's heard a thing - and I did ask a Death Eater."

"How?" asked Harry.

Dermas shrugged. "They're only human. Half a bottle of firewhiskey and I told him I was interested in joining the 'cause', you know, and

he told me vague things about the power and respect being a Death Eater brought you. He knew nothing about an attack though."

"Doesn't mean there won't be one..."

"No it doesn't," agreed Dermas. "But if there's going to be one, let's just hope the Ministry had better luck than we did thwarting it."

Harry sighed and nodded. "Anything else?"

"Yes," Dermas and Sophia said in unison.

"Ladies first," Dermas then said.

Sophia nodded. "Death Eater recruitment is on the increase. I was approached twice last night by recruitment men, who I memory charmed afterwards, but they were talking to all the wizards and witches in the pubs - Voldemort is boosting his numbers."

Harry rubbed the stubble on his chin thoughtfully. "Is that what you were going to say, Dermas?"

Trask nodded. "It was."

"Strength in numbers...." Harry whispered. "I don't suppose you've found Slytherin fortress? Or is that just wishful thinking?"

Trask laughed. "That's like searching for a grain of salt in a stack of needles that's been dumped in a barn full of hay. No one has any idea where it is. No one!"

"I'm afraid I'll have to agree with Trask's appraisal of the situation," Sophia said, with a nod of her head to Dermas. "For all we know it may not even exist..."

"Oh it exists," Harry said quickly, in total honesty. "It just doesn't like to be found."

"What's the move then?" asked Dermas.

Harry shook his head and for a moment stared despondently at the floor. "You two are going to get some sleep," he eventually said.

"While I sort out some supplies and reschedule this morning's meeting to seven o'clock tonight."

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It has been said by many across many worlds and many times, that when it grows dark enough - we can see the stars. A metaphor, perhaps, that light will always find a way to penetrate darkness, even at its source. A good metaphor to believe in... But beliefs are not always correct, and just because a man can die for them it doesn't make them true.

At least, that's what Harry thought as he walked down the crowded street in Diagon Alley, heading towards Quality Quidditch Supplies. He had just bought eight expandable trunks, which could be shrunk down to pocket size. They were of simple design - their only magical feature being the ability to adjust size. One compartment with enough room to store a basic kit of survival gear. Harry intended to use them to their full potential.

Apart from the Trafalgar Square incident yesterday, Death Eater attacks had been zero over the past week or so, and as such people were not as afraid to come out of their homes, and Diagon Alley was rather busy as Harry jostled his way through the crowds. He had to stop on occasion and shake his head, allowing a mysterious darkness that kept settling over his eyes to dissipate.

It had happened three times since he had Apparated to the Alley that morning, and just like the previous time - a veil, almost like a thin black cloth that was semi-transparent, fell before his eyes and made the entire world, or what he could see of it, appear hazy. Harry knew he wasn't imagining anything each time it happened, but he also knew that no one else around him was suffering from this... condition.

Just like he couldn't know his scar was burning while he slept, Harry couldn't know what was happening here - and he wouldn't know for many months - but he shrugged it off now as merely fatigue, and decided to ask Madam Pomfrey for a dreamless sleep potion tonight, so he could get some proper rest.

The dark haze that had settled on his world disappeared, and it fell from Harry's mind also as he entered the Quidditch shop. His eyes beheld the familiar sight gladly, as he took in all the moving Quidditch posters on the wall, the Snitches that were flying around the shop freely, the numerous books on the sport, the walls and cabinets lined with Quidditch merchandise, robes, arm guards, brooms.

The shop wasn't as busy as Harry had expected, and carrying the brown paper parcel with his trunks inside under one arm, he headed over to the counter where a young witch was seated reading the latest edition of *Witch Weekly*. Possessing strawberry blonde hair, which she was absently curling around her wand, Harry coughed politely to get her attention.

The sales witch looked up quickly, and dropped her magazine onto the glass counter. Harry's eyes briefly skipped down to it, and he held back a sigh when he saw his own picture adorning the front cover, under the sub heading: *Who is Harry Potter?*

"How can I help you?" the young witch asked nervously, making the connection with the magazine in a second.

"I'm after some brooms," Harry said.

"Well we've got plenty of them," the witch waved her wand towards a stack of parchment and a piece of it flew deftly into her spare hand. "What type you after?"

"Preferably one that flies," he said with a touch of humour. "A Firebolt."

The young witch, who had offered a small smile at Harry's poor joke, now frowned and appeared to fall into deep thought. "A what?" she asked.

"A Firebolt," Harry said. "International racing broom."

"I've never heard of it..." she replied, shaking her head. "Which company makes it?"

"Obviously one that doesn't exist in this world..." Harry said under his breath. And then louder, "What's your top of the line model?"

"Well..." the young sales witch said nervously, obviously slightly unnerved so far about this encounter. "That would be the WindStream."

"The WindStream?"

"Uh-huh. Fastest broom in the world. Zero to one hundred and fifty in three and a half seconds. Very expensive though."

Harry nodded, thinking of the Firebolt's capabilities. It wasn't that fast! This broom was something entirely different altogether. "How much do they cost?" he then asked, but the price was no problem. The Ministry had given him a book of payment parchment, already signed by the Minister. Blank cheques, to coin a Muggle term. Harry only had to scrawl in the amount of the purchase.

The sales witch sucked in her breath severely. "One would set you back seven hundred galleons."

"Really!?" Harry said amazed. He didn't know for sure the price of a Firebolt back in his own world, but he didn't think it would have been that much.

"You won't be buying one then," she replied, looking slightly dismayed. It wasn't a question.

Harry choked back a small laugh and turned to give her an honest smile. "No, no... I'll take eight."

Packing a broom into each separate trunk, expanding and reducing them all twice, took Harry ten minutes of his time - and it was nearing noon when he stepped back out onto the crowded street of Diagon Alley. Thankfully, no strange haze fell before his eyes and the sun beat down on him with a heat that promised a scorching summer, especially for this part of the world.

*Where to now?* he wondered, looking around at all the different shops. *What would be useful to put in these trunks?* Harry realised then that



it would have been better to wait a day, so he and his team could have made a proper list of items. He was lost now, unsure on what to purchase beyond carry-alls and brooms. *And*, he thought when he saw Ollivander's, *they'll all need to come here to be fitted for a second wand. The wand chooses the wizard.*

*That's it then. I should head back to Hog-* Stopping in mid-stride, Harry knew where he was heading next and turned and began to walk across the road towards a shop that had existed in Hogsmeade back in his own world. Standing proudly against the left wall of Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour, and opposite from Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions, was...

***Elendil*** ***Armourer's***  
***Maker's*** ***of*** ***the*** ***Finest*** ***Battle*** ***Wear***  
***Since 78 A.D.***

With a small smile, Harry remembered the very large, but very happy, man who had owned this store in Hogsmeade. Marcus Elendil, if it was the same man in this universe then he was about six and a half feet tall, had long bear like arms that were knotted with muscle, and a big bushy grey beard that hung halfway down his chest. He was bald and had sharp, piercing grey eyes.

The bell above the door tinkled to announce Harry's arrival as he stepped over and through the frame and into the dusty, archaic shop. The first thing that hit Harry about this shop was the smell. It smelt strongly of leather, or more accurately, dragons hide. There were long columns of armour running the length of the store, brown dragon hide hung from the walls, ceiling, and was piled on the floor. There were also a few stands that held robes, of all colours.

Weaponry, of modern and ancient designs, adorned the walls in an array of shiny silverly surfaces. Long cleavers, bastard swords, claymores, smaller blades and at least three dozen knives all caught Harry's eye. Briefly, it made him long for his own blade, the blade of Gryffindor. If he concentrated on it, his left arm felt somewhat hollow without the sword being there - awaiting his call.

"Can I help you?" came a gruff and thankfully familiar voice from behind Harry. Just like it had happened in his own world, Harry hadn't

heard Marcus Elendil's approach, which was an amazing feat considering the sheer size of the man. He was exactly as Harry had remembered him, right down to the scar along his right arm.

"Marcus Elendil," Harry said strongly, turning around and looking up slightly at the man.

"Do I know you?" Elendil said, suddenly on his guard. Harry saw him eyeing the swords on a stand barely four feet away, and decided he didn't want to get into a fight with this man.

"No..." Harry replied. "But I know you."

"Oh yeah?" he said hotly.

Harry nodded. "You have a reputation as the best armourer in the world, and I've come to buy some armour."

Marcus's expression softened a bit, but he was still suspicious. "Who are you? You look familiar?"

Harry switched his bag containing the eight small trunks from his right hand to his left hand and offered it to the tall man. "Harry Potter," he said. "It's good to meet you."

Harry saw a twinkle of recognition dawn in Elendil's grey eyes as they shook hands. "Well," Marcus said, moving around his display stands and heading for the stool placed behind the sales counter. "S'not often I get much business these days. Armoury's a dying trade, I'm afraid... but I'll see what I can do for you, Mr. Potter."

"Thank you," Harry replied. "I'm looking for nothing but the best, you understand, I did have some made from a Hungarian Horntail, but that didn't hold up well against the blade," he finished, understating the trauma his armour had been placed under when Voldemort had run him through with his own sword.

"Can't have been well made then," Marcus huffed, picking up his long pipe from off of the counter in front of him. He lit it with a click of his fingers, and took a deep breath of the smoke. "Nothing's supposed to be able to get through Horntail. Poor make..."

Harry shrugged. He couldn't tell Marcus that it was he who had actually made the armour... well, a Marcus of another universe. *Damn this got confusing!* Harry thought idly.

"It held up well against brute force and most curses that hit it," Harry then said. "It held up really well. But the blade that pierced it... it was a magical blade."

"Still shouldn't have got through," the large armourer said, waving his hand dismissively. "Dragon armour has magical properties of its own, and I don't know of a harder substance to make it from than Hungarian Horntail."

"Really?" Harry asked, feeling dismayed. *If Hungarian Horntail was it, and Hungarian Horntail had failed... then I'm wasting my time here.*

Marcus laughed as he refilled his pipe with tobacco flakes. "Aye, there used to be another creature we could make the strongest armour from. Back about five hundred years ago. Damn near impregnable this stuff, or so say all the reports."

"What was it?" Harry asked, not really paying much attention anymore. He had turned his attention towards the swords hanging on the walls though. He might as well get a replacement for now, and then...

"A basilisk," Marcus said, and laughed again - as if the idea of obtaining basilisk hide amused him. "Nothing stronger... not in this world anyway. Well my father used to go on and on about how hard it was to get-"

Harry's eyes widened as several pivotal and seemingly invisible pieces of a very complex puzzle fell into place with one simple word, uttered from the mouth of an innocent man just relating his family history. Everything just became so *bleeding* obvious, that for a moment words failed him. It was simple though...

"What did you say?" Harry said quickly, abandoning the sword stand and turning back sharply to look Marcus squarely in the eyes.

Marcus frowned and shrugged. "My dad," he said. "Used to go on for ages about all the types of armour-"

"No, before that."

The armourer fell silent for a moment, frowning at Harry and taking a few short puffs on his pipe. "You mean about the basilisk?" Harry nodded, a smile playing at his lips. Marcus wasn't smiling. "Do you know what a basilisk *is*, Mr. Potter?" he asked.

Harry was shaking his head. *The Chamber of Secrets... Salazar Slytherin's secret chamber. There's got to be something down there about his fortress.* "Giant snake, isn't it?" Harry answered Marcus after a moment. "Fangs, lives for hundreds of years, to look upon it is death. That about right?"

Nodding, Marcus said, "So you see why we can no longer make armour from the basilisk hide. We simply don't have any. Basilisks were fair game back in the Middle Ages and before, but they're near extinction now, if any even still exist at all."

Harry was thinking quickly. It all made sense, everything was coming full circle. He didn't really doubt that he would find something of use down in that Chamber, but did he want to risk waking a basilisk to obtain it. Yes, he answered his own question.

"Also, it used to take dozens of wizards working as one to take down a basilisk for its hide. If there was one, I wouldn't go near it - even though I'd be a very rich man for even making and selling one set of armour from such a hide."

"If you could get a basilisk hide," Harry speculated innocently. "From a large basilisk, fifty feet at least, how many sets of armour could you make?"

Harry saw the eagerness and excitement in Marcus's eyes, even if this was only speculation. Harry knew it wasn't, but did Marcus? "Four dozen sets, at least."

And then, another thought came to Harry, and he knew he'd have no trouble taking down the basilisk a second time. If anything, it would

be ridiculously simple - and all he needed to do was practice a bit of transfiguration.

"If I can get you a basilisk," Harry said slowly. "Will you make me eight sets of armour for free?"

Marcus stared at him for a moment, searching for the punch line maybe, looking for the lie in Harry's eyes. There wasn't one. "If you could get me a basilisk," Marcus said, just as carefully. "Then I'll give you my first born child."

Harry smiled, and then offered his hand again to the man - who now appeared dumbstruck. "That won't be necessary. I'll owl you within the week if I manage to acquire the hide."

Marcus took his hand and then Harry turned to leave, a thousand and one thoughts reeling through his mind as he headed over to the door - the least of all slaying a basilisk. He may have just found Slytherin Fortress!

"Mr. Potter!" Marcus called as the chimes rang out through the shop as he had opened the door. "This isn't illegal, is it? I won't accept tainted merchandise."

"Nothing illegal," Harry replied. "In fact, we'll be doing a good deed. I'll explain it all later. Goodbye."

Leaving a very confused and thoughtful Marcus behind, Harry breathed in the fresh air of Diagon Alley gratefully. It had been stuffy inside the armourers and Marcus' smoking hadn't helped matters. Stepping back onto the cobblestone, Harry had a look around and tried to decide if he had anything left that needed doing. He couldn't think of anything, except maybe going to see about a second wand - but that could wait for now. He did, after all, have an impressive arsenal of spells in his wandless magic depository.

If truth be told now, Harry was slightly excited about his... revelation, if it could be called that, in the armourers. The Chamber of Secrets. It was one of those simple solutions that were only ever obvious after the fact. Of course, there's bound to be more down there than just a

snake. And there was the basilisk down there, *should I bother disturbing it?*

Suddenly, and once again unexpectedly, that strange haze fell before Harry's eyes, and this time he felt a quick ripple of pain in his forehead. It was so brief, not even a second's worth, that he was sure he had imagined it, but for that to coincide with this weird haze before his vision was... disturbing.

Crowds of people walked about and around him, completely oblivious to the sensation crossing Harry's sight, and Harry momentarily found himself studying it closer. He closed his eyes and counted to three, and when he opened them the haze had once again departed, but this time the memory of it remained strong. *What's happening?* he thought, not so willing to mark this up to fatigue anymore. *I'll see Madam Pomfrey for a check-up, and some potion. That'll -*

A world that we live in can be many things... cruel... passionate... forgiving... violent. All aspects of a human perspective that is ever seeking redemption. Never though, has a world been fair - and despite what you may think, that is a *good* thing. If everything was fair, then the bad things that happen to you would occur only because you deserved them.

Harry's world, whichever he lived in, was no exception. Fairness had nothing to do with what happened next, and never would. A seven million galleon price tag on human life is enough to entice even the most moralistic of men, who are in the right trade, and Harry had made no secret of his trip to Diagon Alley that morning.

Families, working men and women, Aurors on patrol, none of that mattered to the hardcore bounty hunter. Nothing mattered to these professionals, not even the laws of a country. Harry had been told all of this by Art Nuan, a man who was cut from the same mould as those who hunted him, and he hadn't really thought it any different than facing a Death Eater. Both had a disregard for human life.

This cold truth was brought home to Harry personally over the next few minutes, as there was something decisively different between fighting a Death Eater with a cause, to a man who was out to make money, and this was just the way of the world. The man standing

behind Harry, with the long, thin, and infinitely sharp blade in his hand, felt no emotion as he brought it up above his head, and aligned it with Harry's exposed neck - and was that fair? Perhaps survival never was, but it was something that Harry was exceedingly good at.

And in the small moments between seconds that thoughts could be processed in, Harry realised several things. One, the breeze on his neck that had no identifiable source. Two, the glint of silver he caught in the corner of his right eye - just on the edge of his peripheral vision. And three, the alarm bells going off in his head. Instinct had saved his life more than once over the years, and Harry's instinct then was to duck - and duck quickly.

A streak of silver cut through the air and Harry fell quickly, ducking his head down to the left as he did. Gasps and screams from the surrounding innocent crowd reached his ears as he swung back up quickly - the blade having passed over his head by mere inches - but Harry did not need to hear them to know his days of relative peace had not lasted long.

In a blur of pure anger and battle hardened reflexes, Harry spun on his heel just as he returned to his full height from his brief scrape, his dance, with Death. He was facing a man who was standing only half a foot away, and when their eyes locked Harry saw surprise, and doubt. *Don't start something you can't finish*, he thought.

Diagon Alley stopped as those surrounding Harry and his attacker began to retreat quickly, away from the danger. Harry took a small second to examine this man, who was roughly the same height as he was at just less than six feet, and who possessed a mane of long dark hair that swept around his shoulders in shiny locks of black. He had a pointed face with cool brown eyes that were those of a professional killer. Harry thought his eyes might look the same to an outside observer.

Another thing Harry noticed about this man, was that he did seem to have quite big upper body muscles, which were now currently working to raise his blade for another strike. *Shit*, Harry thought, and dropped his shopping bag with all his recent purchases in it to the ground and jumped back, narrowly avoiding the pointed tip of the

blade that cut the slack of his robes and sliced through the fabric as if it were butter.

The crowds gasped again, and Harry wondered why none of them would do anything, surely the Aurors in the crowd, if there were any, would help. No time to think about that though, he had to survive now.

Harry thought about what he should do. Physically attack? He didn't know much about hand to hand fighting. Just what Scrapfold had taught him in their short lessons a few months ago, and what he had learned from Dudley about boxing last September. No, magic it was. Intending to raise his palm, Harry had to jump back again as the black-haired man swung his blade at his neck.

He stumbled on the cobblestone as he avoided a flurry of stabs and slashes aimed to kill, and Harry jerked aside just as the sword blade past less than an inch in front of his face. The black-haired man, whoever he was, lunged after him, this time aiming his blade lower across Harry's stomach.

Balling his hand into a fist, as it was impossible to get off any magic at this range without losing a hand to that blade, Harry spun to one side and brought his fist down hard on the right wrist of the man. The wrist holding the sword.

"Christ..." Harry breathed as his hand came into contact with that wrist at great speed. It went numb as a bolt a pain shot up his arm. It felt as if he'd just punched a wall.

"Not good enough, my friend," the man smiled and mocked him. His accent was one Harry was not familiar with. Somewhere east, possibly Russian. "And I thought this would be hard. I wonder why your bounty is so high?"

Harry jumped back, it seemed to him that was all he was doing in this fight, just as the black-haired man swung his blade again. It was a feint though, and Harry fell for it. Concentrating on avoiding the blade, he didn't expect the man's left fist to come pummeling into his ribs with what felt like the force of a sledgehammer.



The blow knocked all the air out of Harry's recently healed chest. He stumbled backward, panting and gasping for air and struggling to stay on his feet. He failed there, and fell back over a hole in the cobblestone road. This was what saved his life though, as he threw his hand, with its glowing palm, up before him as he fell, and cried,

*"Amos Nex!"*

A single silver arrow was shot like a bullet from his glowing palm and recognition flared in the black-haired man's eyes a moment before the arrow tore through his chest and shot out of his back just as fast as it had entered. Harry hit the ground hard, but the black-haired bounty hunter was dead, and he knew it, as he fell to his knees - looking down at the small red-rimmed hole in his green robes.

Blood pulsed in the wound, spilling out quickly and vitally across the dark fabric. The crowd around both of them was silent as Harry struggled to sit up. "That's why," he said quietly, as the life drained from the man's eyes. He had just answered the one, and only, question the bounty hunter had asked him.

"Commander Potter," a voice rang out in the silent alley, as the black-haired man fell backwards off his knees and lay slumped and bleeding on the cobblestone of the alley.

Harry stood up and with a flick of his hand summoned his shopping bag back to him. Thankfully the brown paper was sealed tightly, and nothing had spilled onto the ground. He turned to the voice that had called to him through the crowd, which was observing him with grave awe.

Three brightly robed men were approaching him from about a dozen feet away down the alley, just outside of Gringotts. They were Aurors, they had their wands drawn, and had witnessed the whole scene from further down the alley, and had tried to jostle their way through the packed crowds to arrive in time to help. But it had been a quick fight.

"Can I leave you guys to clean this up?" Harry asked, waving his hand at the lifeless lump of his first encounter with a bounty hunter that was after his head. Not waiting for an answer, Harry

Disapparated with a small pop and appeared hundreds of miles away outside of the Hogwarts castle gates.

Rubbing his bruised chest, Harry limped over to the vine covered stone column that marked the entrance to the old castle. Placing his bag down, Harry sighed and leaned against the cool stone, staring up at the gargoyle that had sat there for a thousand years as a silent sentinel for the castle.

*When will this end?* he asked the universe or anyone that would listen. Harry turned up his palm and looked at the faint glow that highlighted the blood in his veins, pumping around and keeping him alive. Magic had changed his life, nearly ended it on countless occasions, and had made him a killer.

*What am I now?* he wondered, remembering the last flicker of life he had seen in the black-haired man's eyes. *Hero or villain? What will I give or sacrifice to achieve an end, whatever that end may be?*

Wind blew the blossoming white roses that lay along the road to Hogsmeade back and forth. Harry had always admired these thorny flowers, even though he knew their existence was facilitated by magic. Probably something Professor Sprout had done in one of her Muggle flower lessons. But nonetheless he found them strangely beautiful, but deadly. *Why does a rose have thorns? Perhaps, in another world, along another outlet of the Boundary, they don't...*

*Or perhaps,* Harry thought sadly, *perhaps there's a universe out there somewhere where I'm a Muggle, living in blissful ignorance.* But, again, that was wishful thinking. *And there's nothing wrong with wishful thinking,* Harry reminded himself, *if only used briefly, as a break from reality... from this world.*

But it would never be anything more than a dream, and Harry knew that that was life. He was stuck with the lot the universes had thrown at him, that Fate had given him, and all he could do was strive to make it a better place than how he found it. This was, ultimately, his only goal in life - all for a better world.

This is the world Harry lives in... a world of magical terrorists, of bounty hunters, of dark and light. A place where hundreds could die

against their will to appease a madman's whim. A world of unbelievable violence and sadness... but, as Harry had thought more than once, *that's life*. He could expect nothing more or nothing less. He had to do what he had to do, and no one could fault him on that. It was never easy though, it never would be.

*The hardest thing about this life, is having to live it...*

Remember that, even if you remember nothing else.

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## Chapter 14 - Destiny Darkened

*Destiny has two ways of crushing us - by refusing our wishes and by fulfilling them.*

*~~Henri Frederic Amiel*

"Blink once for me," Lily said kindly, shining the pale light of her wand into Harry's eyes. "That's good... and again."

Deciding that something was wrong with him on the way up from the castle gates twenty minutes ago, when that strange dark haze had once again fallen before his eyes, Harry had come straight to the hospital wing for a quick check-up. Lily, his mother (of a kind), was the only one there - as Madam Pomfrey had gone into London to replenish her dwindling potion stock - so she was seeing to Harry.

"What did it feel like?" she asked.

Harry shrugged, and rubbed his tired eyes now that Lily was done shining her wand into them. "It didn't *feel* at all,' he said after some thought on the matter. "It was just a... a haze, kind of. Like I was looking through a mesh screen. I thought it might just be because I'm tired...."

Lily nodded. "Quite possibly... do you ever slow down?" she asked with a smile. Her smile faltered when Harry morosely shook his head. "Well I can't see anything physically wrong with your eyes. Perfect vision, actually."

"Could I... could I get some dreamless sleep potion?" he asked quietly. "I need a good night's sleep."

"Of course," Lily said quickly, and flicked her wand towards the potions cabinet in her small office across the infirmary. Ten seconds later and she handed Harry a small vial of grey liquid. He accepted it gratefully and slipped it into the pocket of his robes. "So..." Lily said. "What did you get up to today?"

Harry laughed sadly, bitterly and pressed a hand against his forehead. "Not much..." he managed. "I bought a few things for the team, devised a way to find Slytherin Fortress, and killed a man...."

Despite herself, Lily gasped and sat down onto the bed next to Harry, placing a hand on his battle scarred shoulder. "What happened?"

"A bounty hunter, I think," he whispered, staring despondently at the stone wall across the room. "I'll have to ask Art... anyway, he... he came at me in Diagon Alley - took a swing at my head with a blade, I pierced his heart with an arrow."

"Self-defence," Lily replied.

Harry shrugged and suddenly became aware of her hand on his shoulder, his scarred shoulder - the one pierced by the blade, that had not healed properly. "My shoulder," he said. "It -er- it sometimes hurts or goes numb in the mornings. I was wondering if there was anything you could do about that?"

Nodding, Lily rose and with a warm smile, walked over to her office this time - not summoning anything - and disappeared inside of it. The sound of drawers being opened and closed reached Harry's ears, and he stood up, picking up the bag with his purchases in it as he did.

"Here we are," Lily said a few minutes later as she emerged from her office. "This cream should help. Apply it before you go to bed at night and it should ease the muscles and repair the damage... although I'm afraid that your shoulder may be beyond healing entirely."

"Thanks," Harry said and accepted the small glass jar that was about a third full of a clear, jelly like substance. He placed it in his bag alongside the small trunks. "I've got to go now. Lots to do."

"Do take care, Harry," Lily pleaded, somewhat desperately. "Don't die on us."

Harry looked into her eyes that were identical to his for a brief moment, before turning away and leaving without saying a word. It was early in the afternoon when he stumbled out into the corridor

after an unexpected bout of dizziness. The world spun around him and after it settled he slowly began the trek towards the Room of Requirement.

Sunlight pierced the castle through the many windows in thin rays of grid-like squares along the red carpet that trailed along most of the stone floor. In time he came to the invisible room and, after walking past it three times, a small wooden door popped into existence and Harry turned the gilded golden knob and entered the darkened room.

The large circular meeting table was in its usual position in the centre of the room, as Harry had required the headquarters room to appear, and he sat down heavily in his chair at the 'head' of the table. He placed his bag on the table and required the fireplace to roar to life and provide some warmth.

A few moments later and he removed one of the trunks from within his bag and held it in the palm of his hand. It wasn't very big in this state, and Harry thought it could easily be concealed. These things would prove to be very useful soon, and over the coming months.

Yawning, Harry put the trunk back in the paper bag and scratched at the stubble around his chin for a few thoughtful moments and then removed the dreamless sleep potion vial from his robes pocket, staring at it critically. *Are you going to work?* he wondered, uncorking the vial.

Shrugging, Harry swallowed half of the grey liquid and then stoppered it again. Feeling sluggish almost immediately, he rose from his chair and required a small bed, a fold out cot really, to appear against the far wall. Legs heavier than lead, he collapsed onto the bed and only just managed to kick his shoes off, before pulling the heavy quilt up around his shoulders - his head now resting gently against the fluffy feather pillow.

Sleep came quickly after that, but it wasn't dreamless - it never would be anymore - but it was, for good or ill, peaceful. Harry slept through to later that evening, and all he dreamt about was a single, solitary white rose, swaying in the wind.

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Harry awoke feeling somewhat refreshed, and healthier than he had done in over a month. His shoulder was aching painfully, but a few rotations of that and the circulation starting moving again properly and the pain disappeared. The clock on the wall told Harry that it was approaching seven o'clock, and the meeting with his squad would be starting soon.

Standing with a stretch, Harry slipped on his shoes and required the bed to disappear. He then returned to his seat at the circular table, examining his bag which was exactly where he had left it six hours ago. It wasn't long before his team began to arrive, and Harry greeted each one of them in turn under the soft torchlight he liked the room to provide.

First to arrive were those of his team who were staying in quarters at the castle. Sirius and Dermas arrived together, along with Grace and Thomas Fright a few minutes later. Sophia Tréla was next through the door, her hair tied back in a smooth ponytail. She greeted Harry like she always did, and took the seat two over from his right.

Tonks was next, she greeted them all kindly, and last to come in silently - glancing meaningfully at Harry - was Art Nuan, their hitwizard. He only inclined his head to the others as he took his seat.

"Good evening everyone," Harry began the meeting. "Straight into it then, any news?"

"Nothing to report," Sirius said.

"Me neither," Dermas was next.

"Nothing, Commander," Sophia whispered.

"It's unusually quiet out there," Tonks said.

"Nothing," Grace and Thomas said in unison.

All of their gazes fell on Art, who was staring at Harry with his chin resting on his closed fist, which he had placed against the arm of his chair. "That man you killed today, Commander, was named Gunther

Nicholia. An international bounty hunter, and one of the most vicious in the business."

"What's this?" Sirius asked sharply, glancing at Harry. "What happened?"

"I was attacked today in Diagon Alley," Harry said, addressing the whole group. "A man came at me with a sword, I killed him... Has anyone heard anything at all about a possible attack, Tonks?"

Nymphadora Tonks shook her head slowly. She had spent her day back at the Auror division, speaking to Remus about his contacts and doing research with the Muggle authorities. The attack on Trafalgar Square had been officially classified as a terrorist attack, with several groups actually claiming responsibility. Only the Muggle Prime Minister and a select number of other non-magical individuals knew the truth.

"With any luck," Tonks said. "There won't be another one."

"We can only hope," Sophia said passionately, and unexpectedly, as she rarely showed emotion. "What do you have in that bag, Commander?"

Removing a small trunk from the bag, Harry placed it on the table and then, with a flick of his wrist, sent his wand into his hand from the concealed holster - he tapped the trunk once and it enlarged itself several times over, until it obscured Harry from view. "What we decided upon," Harry said. "There's one for each of you. Nothing in them at the moment except for a WindStream -"

"A WindStream!" Sirius suddenly exclaimed, as Harry shrunk the trunk back down. "Harry," he laughed. "You bought eight of the best brooms in the world... how much did that set our good friends at the Ministry back?"

"Five thousand, four hundred galleons," Harry said. "Although with the figures Crouch gave me the other day, I'll doubt they'll even notice it."



"You didn't buy anything else?" asked Grace, raising her eyebrows questioningly.

"I wasn't sure what to buy," Harry shrugged, "beyond the brooms. We'll have to make a list... and we all have to head into Diagon Alley at some point to buy an extra wand."

"And some dragon armour," Dermal said, fingering the hilt of his sword in its sheath around his waist. "Did you inquire about that, Harry?"

"As a matter of fact, I did," Harry said. "And while I was there I also figured out how to find Slytherin fortress."

Silence followed this statement, as fifteen years had past in pointless search for that castle, and many had long since given up hope of ever finding it. "Well tell us," Tonks said eagerly. "What's the plan?"

Harry folded his hands in front of him on his lap, and looked at each one of them in turn. "How many of you know about the legend of the Chamber of Secrets?"

Sirius chuckled. "You can't be serious..."

Harry nodded slowly, and Sirius, upon seeing that, raised his palms upwards in indifference. The others around the table were all staring between the two of them, as only Tonks and Dermal had ever heard about the chamber - the rest of the team had not been magically educated at Hogwarts.

"Well..." Sirius began. "According to legend, Salazar Slytherin left an old chamber somewhere in this castle, put a monster in there, and then stormed out in a huff to wage war against the Muggles and those not of pureblood. The chamber can't exist though... in nearly a thousand years no one has ever found it. Prongs and I used to spend weeks at a time searching for it back when we were students here. There's no chamber."

"Actually," Harry said, "there is."

"Where is it, Harry?" asked Tonks.

"In the girl's bathroom on the second floor," Harry said promptly, as he formed a small ball of magical light in his palm, and began to slowly throw it from hand to hand - changing its colour as he did.

Tonks giggled, thinking the answer an uncharacteristic joke on Harry's part. Harry wasn't laughing. "How could you possibly know that?" she asked.

Harry waved away her question and sent his ball of light sailing through the air with a thought, where it dissipated against the dark stone wall. "We'd still be here into next week if I try to answer that. Just know that it's there - hidden in plain sight really."

"What aren't you telling us, Harry?" asked Thomas Fright, frowning at him.

Harry met his gaze and didn't flinch. "Nothing you need to know," he said, and it was Fright that first looked away.

"Say that it is there," Sirius intervened. "What makes you think it will lead us to Slytherin Fortress?"

Harry shrugged. "A hunch... a feeling... instinct. I think Slytherin would have been arrogant enough to leave something, some clue, a hint."

"According to the legend, the chamber is home to a monster..." Trask stated. "Any ideas on that, Harry?"

"Leave it to me," he replied, but his thoughts had now fallen on the basilisk. *Should I risk opening the chamber when there are so many innocent children in this castle? Is the information worth the risk? Can I kill the snake again?*

"Harry...?" Tonks began.

Harry looked over the table at her. "Yes?"

"We still have a few choices besides the... chamber... that may lead us to the Fortress."

"What are you talking about?"

"Voldemort's son. He's still under lock and key in the bowels of the Ministry - he could tell us," Tonks proposed.

*Ethan*, thought Harry and his mind blurred for a brief moment. *Why do I feel as if I'm going to be seeing him a lot over the coming weeks... months... years?* Harry had last seen him bleeding to death on top of Azkaban nearly two weeks ago now. He was an evil man in this universe, and for all Harry knew most others. It would be wise to speak to him before daring to open the chamber.

Glancing at the clock on the wall, Harry made his decision. "Can you take me to the Ministry now, Tonks?" he asked. "It's only seven thirty, and we both have unrestricted access."

"Couldn't it wait until tomorrow?" she replied.

Harry shook his head. "I can't sit here and do nothing, and I don't want to open the Chamber of Secrets unless I absolutely have to - the risk isn't worth it, yet."

Tonks sighed. "Come on then," she said, standing. Apparate or floo?"

Harry stood as well. "We'll walk down to the gates and Apparate," he began. "Looks like tonight's meeting is going to be cut short. Can I ask the rest of you to decide on a list of items for the trunks? Good."

A few polite goodbyes later and a ten minute walk down the grounds in the failing light, and Harry and Tonks Apparated to the Atrium of the Ministry as they passed over the ward line. A second's worth of blackness and Harry steadied himself as he materialised on the Apparation point in the finely decorated Atrium.

Briefly he remembered back to last November - ironically it had been Ethan that had taught him to Apparate. Fate knew irony well. As it was getting late, the Atrium wasn't that crowded. A lot of witches and wizards were lining up at the floo hubs to catch a fire home and there were a few Aurors moving about the large room, pausing momentarily at the Fountain of Magical Brethren before moving on over to the phone box that led up into London.

Torches along the blue and gold trimmed walls were being extinguished periodically by a small wizard with his wand as he ambled about the large floor, and the security desk was empty.

"This way," nodded Tonks, pulling Harry by the arm over to the golden grilled elevators in the smaller room adjoining the Atrium. "We have to descend to level five, alongside the Auror division."

Silently, Harry and Tonks entered the nearest elevator alone - the grate sliding down noisily after them. It took only half a minute before the cool female voice announced that they had arrived on their desired floor, and with Tonks leading, Harry walked down the poorly lit corridor, his footsteps echoing Tonks' as she lead the way through the maze of Ministry offices and wooden oak doors.

"You'll have to sign in and out and surrender your wand when asked," instructed Tonks as she descended down a flight of short stairs and came to a door that was marked with the emblem of the Ministry - two wands crossed over the British Isles. "Although I don't suppose it makes any difference with you," she finished with a small, nervous smile.

Pushing through the door, Harry was momentarily dazzled by the amount of light in this room. It took his eyes a few moments to adjust, and he was soon following Tonks again towards another set of double oak doors about fifty feet away. There were two Aurors outside these doors, one seated behind a desk, the other standing with his arms folded next to the door.

Their approach was regarded coldly, and it wasn't until Tonks gave her name and Auror number that the two men relaxed slightly.

"We're here to see one of the prisoners caught at Azkaban," Tonks then said, addressing the man seated behind the desk, who was inking a quill and unrolling a scroll of parchment.

"Name?" he asked from behind the desk, his bushy brown eyebrows pointing down in a frown.

"If he has one, he hasn't told us," she replied. "You Know Who's son..."

The Auror behind the desk looked startled for a moment but he quickly recovered. "No one's to see him. Special order from the Minister himself -"

"Minister Crouch won't mind me going in there," Harry spoke for the first time, stepping up to the desk. "Harry Potter."

"Dear Merlin, so you are," the Auror said, clearly stunned. "Well I..." he looked to the other Auror for help.

"Orders are orders," this man shrugged. "Sorry, Commander Potter."

Harry frowned. "I'll take responsibility," he said. "The Minister really won't mind."

"Well..."

"This is very important to the war effort," Tonks stressed. "If we could just have five minutes."

"What do you think, Steve?" the Auror behind the desk asked his partner.

"Five minutes," he said with conviction. "And if the Minister asks, you'll answer for it, Commander."

Harry nodded, and then he and Tonks went through the process of signing the parchment and surrendering their wands. Harry sent his into his palm with a flick of his wrist and dropped it on the desk indifferently. "Steve will show you through," the man behind the desk said. "Five minutes."

It took one minute for the Auror named Steve, a tall man with short brown hair and dark eyes to unlock the large doors which he had been guarding. A key was placed in the bronzed lock and then a complex series of incantations were uttered to deactivate the wards.

The corridor beyond was lit with the usual torchlight and felt, to Harry, slightly damp and cold. He and Tonks followed Auror Steve silently deeper into the rarely used holding cells of the Ministry. Occasionally Harry felt a tingle on the back of his neck, and knew he was passing

through more security wards - possibly designed to check for concealed items or wands.

The corridor was fairly straight forward. They followed it without deviating from the main path, even though many other corridors shot off to the left and right. It was too dark to see any of them, and as Harry glanced behind he saw that the torches were extinguishing themselves as they fell out of range. Another security measure, meant to light up the area wherever there was movement.

Had Harry and Tonks chosen to walk down any of these side paths, they would have come across strong iron doors set impregnably into the stone with bars for windows. Holding cells - cleaner and a lot more humane than those of Azkaban. Had it still existed, that is.

After about two minutes the corridor they were on ended abruptly with one of those iron doors barring their way. This door was for high security prisoners, and as such it was protected with a series of wards just as complex as the ones back on the door in the sign-in room. The tall man named Steve spent some time repeating the incantations he had said a moment ago.

"Are you coming in?" Harry asked Tonks, as Steve grasped the iron handle of the large door and, with a grunt, pulled it open.

Tonks nodded. "Would you rather do it alone?"

Harry blinked and then shook his head. "It's probably best someone's there to keep the peace..." he whispered, looking through the door - and seeing an identical one a few feet ahead.

"That door will open when I close this one," said Steve. "A warning now. If you have a wand on you the scanning wards in there will stun you instantly. Anything you'd like to declare?"

Harry and Tonks shook their heads, and entered the small room between rooms, and waited a few moments for Steve to close the iron door behind them. "Let me do the talking," Harry said.

A blue light flashed as the door clunked closed behind Harry and Tonks, and it was followed by a red one. *The scanning wards*, Harry

thought. Facing the other door now, Harry prepared himself for what was next, as silently the large iron door swung open on its hinges.

The cell was smaller than he thought it would be. Four stone walls with a torch blazing on each, and an impregnable stone roof that was four feet thick above their heads. The walls were smooth, no cracks and magic kept them intact, unbreakable. The only piece of furniture in the cell was a small bed, upon which sat a dark figure - staring emotionlessly at the latest arrivals to his cell.

"Good evening," Harry said strongly, showing the same amount of emotion as his adversary - none. Tonks remained by the door silently, as Harry crossed the room to stand a few feet away from the pale figure, leaning with his back against the wall.

"Is it evening?" Ethan asked in a harsh, cold voice that croaked on every syllable. "I wouldn't know..."

Harry saw that Ethan's eyes still held the tint of red, the sign of dark magic, and that they flashed dangerously as they connected with Harry's. He was wearing a set of plain black - prison issue - robes, and his black hair was sprawled untidily across his head. His face was covered in a short amount of fuzz, two weeks growth as he hadn't been able to shave. Ethan's hands rested on his knees and his bare feet were brushing the floor.

"It is evening," Harry replied. "Evening on the 18<sup>th</sup> of April-"

"I wondered how long it would take you to get here, Potter," Ethan croaked. "You've come for the location to my father's fortress..."

Harry said nothing for a moment. He walked along the bed and put his back against the nearest wall, slipping his hands into his pockets as he did. "What's your name?" he asked, unexpectedly.

Ethan's gaze had followed him to the wall, but now he looked across the room to stare at Tonks. To her credit, she held his glance, and after a few moments Ethan's eyes fell down to the smooth stone floor.

"My father has yet to give me one," he answered Harry. "One day, perhaps when I reach adulthood, he'll bestow me with a dark name - one that will strike fear into the hearts of the weak as his does."

"Voldemort," Harry said, and Ethan glared at him. "Do you mind if I call you Ethan then? For convenience sake."

"A filthy Muggle name... much like Harry, you mock us both."

Harry shrugged. "To each his own. Where is your father cowering?"

Ethan laughed bitterly. "How many attempts have been made on your life since my incarceration, Potter?" he asked. "How many do you expect to follow?"

"We're not here to talk about me," Harry replied, ignoring the question. Ethan was nothing if not intelligent.

"No...." Ethan whispered thoughtfully. "Although what a tale that would be to hear. For curiosity's sake, where do you come from?"

Harry smiled conspiratorially. "What did Voldemort tell you about me?"

Slowly, Ethan stood up and his joints cracked and ached as he took a few steps closer to Harry. Harry didn't move, but his palm inside of his pocket tingled with magic. "A strange thing... whispers of other worlds. Is that true?"

"Perhaps... what would you do if I told you?"

Ethan smiled now, and then turned and limped across the room to lean against the opposite wall. Harry noticed that limp and realised it was he who had given it to him, when he had thrown Trask's sword through the back of Ethan's leg with his mind. It hadn't been healed properly - Harry felt a brief spark of remorse as he thought of that, but that feeling was gone a moment later.

"I would," Ethan began, "honestly stand in awe of the magic capable of doing that. It is a power even the Dark should respect."



Harry felt, at least this time, that Ethan was speaking truthfully. "It is true," Harry whispered, his mind falling back into the boundary, the Stream - and the entity he had met there. The Guardian, whatever that was.

"Ah," smiled Ethan. It didn't reach his eyes. "You don't belong here... you shouldn't have interfered. Merlin knows what consequences there could be for you - let us hope they are painful."

Harry was slowly losing his patience. "Tell me how to find your father. It could help you when it comes to sentencing."

Ethan laughed again, running a hand through his hair. "We all know that for my 'crimes', life in Nabakza is the bare minimum. Death probable. Do not attempt to fool me, Potter. That is futile."

"You don't sound too concerned about this," Harry said.

"I'm not. My father will raze this Ministry to the ground before long, and I will rejoin him. Our fury will crush the world."

Harry scowled. "Your father will be dead soon. Now tell me where to find him!"

"Death will claim this world before I answer to you, Potter," Ethan spat, his hands curling into fists.

Silently, Harry stared at Ethan for a full minute, weighing up his options. He was never going to talk, that much was clear. So Harry was wasting his time here. Shrugging once, he nodded to Ethan and then began to make his way back over to the iron door that Tonks was standing against.

She pulled it open as he approached and just as Harry reached it, Ethan spoke a final time.

"We are not done, you and me," he said. "Soon, we will battle to the death. I feel that coming... it will be spectacular."

Harry walked into the small room between the iron doors, and without turning around, said, "Where I come from...." he began slowly. "Your

father killed you because you made the right choices. You could have been so much more... I sincerely hope I don't have to kill you."

"Hope for the best but prepare for the worst, Harry," Ethan said finally, just as the iron door closed and sealed him once again alone in his stone prison.

"Well what the hell did all of that mean?" Tonks asked once they were back outside the cell, and following Auror Steve back along the passage.

Harry was deep in thought as they walked, but he offered Tonks a small smile as they walked. "You know I said I could find the Chamber of Secrets?" he asked her.

"Uh-huh."

Harry sighed. "Well that's because I opened it in another world."

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*The morning of April 19<sup>th</sup>, 1997*

"How have you been, Harry?" Albus Dumbledore asked kindly from behind his large desk. Fawkes sang a single note as he said this, and it warmed Harry the way it always did.

"Busy," Harry replied honestly. *That was the truth*, he thought. Having managed a few hours sleep last night after he and Tonks had arrived back at ten o'clock, with the help of the dreamless sleep potion, Harry had been up since three a.m., practicing his transfigurations skills for what lay ahead.

"Quite a lot you have undertaken since arriving in our world," Dumbledore said. "I fear that if you keep this pace up you could do yourself some damage."

Harry shrugged. "That's not about to change any time soon, too much to do - so little time in which to do it. In five months I can catch the next equinox out of here."

"We shall be sorry to see you go. You've brought nothing but hope to our world," Dumbledore said.

"But left another at the mercy of a madman," Harry whispered. "And I just don't feel... right in this world. Something is wrong, but I can't place it. I have to go back, that's what feels right."

Dumbledore nodded and a comfortable silence fell between the two of them. It was broken only by Fawkes' gently singing, and from the small murmurs uttered by the dozens of portraits adorning the walls. A moment later and Dumbledore spoke again.

"What brings you to my office today then, Harry? You mentioned something about needing my approval..."

"I do," Harry nodded. "I want to open the Chamber of Secrets, Professor."

Dumbledore visibly paled, and Harry saw him clutching the arms of his chair tightly - so much so that his ancient knuckles turned white. "The Chamber...."

"If this world is as close to mine as I think it is," Harry continued. "Then the Chamber was opened fifty years ago." Dumbledore nodded slowly, and pain was reflected in his eyes. "I thought so. I think the defining event in this universe, that makes it so different from my own in this time, was what happened at Godric's Hollow sixteen or so years ago. That means that Riddle opened the Chamber and -"

"A female student died," Dumbledore managed. "Yes... Tom Riddle. Voldemort. The heir of Slytherin. The chamber was never found, Harry, nor the monster slain."

Harry leaned forward in his chair. "In my world it was - I found it, I killed what was inside. And now I'm here, four years later, making all new mistakes for the same reasons, and I want your permission, as Headmaster, to open the Chamber and see what's down there."

"Why?"

"I'm willing to bet there's something down there that will lead me, lead us, to Slytherin Fortress - and Voldemort."

Dumbledore stood up from his chair, and moved around the desk so he could gently stroke Fawkes, who was still singing softly. "What monster makes that Chamber its home? What evil lies beneath this castle?"

Harry sighed. "The king of snakes. A basilisk... that answers only to the heir of Slytherin."

"Merlin..." breathed the Headmaster. "A thousand years. We couldn't know... Myrtle."

"If we're lucky - the beast will be asleep," Harry continued, ever strong and goal orientated. "And we can get in and out without ever having to wake it... but, if it does awake, I'm ready to slay it again."

"How did you manage such a task the first time?" asked Dumbledore, turning to face Harry and leaving Fawkes for the moment. "And at twelve years of age?"

Harry stood now, and turned away from the headmaster and glanced up at the shelves that lined the walls of the study. His eyes passed over portraits, Dumbledore's strange silver instruments, and then finally fell upon the patched and well used Sorting Hat.

"I had some help," he said carefully. "From Godric Gryffindor."

"The sword?"

Harry nodded. "Down in the Chamber, four years ago, Fawkes blinded the basilisk, and as it lunged at me I pierced the roof of its mouth with the sword of Gryffindor, my sword, and killed it. It was luck, for the most part - but some force didn't want me to die that day..."

Harry hadn't taken his eyes off the Sorting Hat as he spoke, and now, with a flick of his wrist and a thought, he summoned the brown hat from its stand and caught it gently in his left hand.

"You intend to retrieve the sword again?" asked Dumbledore.

Harry held the hat in his hands for a long moment, staring down into the darkness that seemed to go on forever beneath its rim. "It is always better to be safe than sorry," he said, and placed the worn hat on his head.

"I need your help again," Harry whispered, just as the torn rim of the hat fell before his eyes.

*"Hello again, young Gryffindor,"* replied the most ancient, and wise voice - the sentient magical being, who lived inside the hat. *"How can I aid the descendant of Gryffindor?"*

"His sword. Do you still have it? Will you give it to me?"

*"Ah..."* the Voice grew cold. *"A request I should have expected. To answer your first question, yes - I do still possess the blade of your ancestor... as for the second... no, you may not have it."*

Harry bristled, feeling unexpected anger. His magic bubbled. "Why not?"

*"Power... it courses through your veins. You are magic in its purest form... I see in your mind how you have wielded such power, and it saddens me,"* the voice said, and Harry thought he could hear regret in that voice.

"Wha- Why?"

*"You are well acquainted with Death, having nearly crossed over yourself many times, and the path your soul walks is dark - and growing darker with your choices."*

"Where is this going?" Harry asked, again feeling angry. "I mean, sure, I've done some pretty damn terrible things over the last few months - but it's all been for the greater good..."

*"Do you remember this?"* asked the hat, and Harry felt a sharp pain in his mind. A moment later and one of his more painful memories was pushed forward into his mind's eye. He saw himself falling through the sky with a glowing red wand held out in front of him. Thunder and lightning tore the sky asunder around him, and rain splashed off his

face. Hogsmeade approached fast and Harry let fly his curse, his powerful curse. The blast that followed killed thirty Death Eaters.

"Of course I remember that," he whispered. "It was when I first realised that to win this war I'd have to kill. What I did there... saved the lives of twice as many *good* Aurors."

*"The end justifies the means?"*

"On that occasion it did."

*"Hmm... there is another reason, why I should not give you the sword."*

"And what is that?" Harry asked.

*"You are not of this world. You are not the descendant of our Gryffindor."*

"Your descendant is dead and buried," Harry whispered. "All this world has is me."

*"And yet you are as an accomplished killer as those that threaten to destroy our world... violence isn't always the answer."*

Harry shrugged, staring into the darkness around him. "It's the only one that Voldemort understands. Now, will you give me the sword?"

Silence, for a few moments.

*"I... will not. Forces of both light and dark are battling for dominance in your mind. If the darkness wins, I would not provide it with such a weapon as the blade of Gryffindor."*

Harry frowned. "That won't happen, I won't let it happen."

*"It is not a matter of choice-"*

"Everything!" Harry cut in. "Is a matter of choice."

Suddenly and viciously, Harry felt another stab of pure pain in his mind, and the image that was pushed forward this time was of those

final moments in his own world, and of him stepping into the circle, the tear, in the air - and then everything that had happened after that, whilst Harry had floated near death in the Stream, and spoke to the Guardian.

*"CHOICE! You bent time and space to your will with no thought to the consequences. You meddle with the very magic of existence, you abuse power -"*

"I SAVE LIVES!" Harry roared. "I take lives, I change lives - I play God! So what? Who are you to judge me on what's in my past? I command you, I order you, to return to me what is rightfully mine, by birth. Give me the sword!"

*"Are you afraid?"* the hat asked angrily, and after another brief moment of pain Harry saw himself unleash his magic upon Voldemort, surviving the Killing Curse again, and infusing his mortal enemy with power unimaginable. *"You should be. You were too young and foolish to possess the power, but in a cruel twist of irony you were the only one that could - and look at the consequences of this one choice."*

"The consequences are my problem, not yours. I did it, I'll fix it, and live with it either way. But I need the sword!"

*"Why? It is not just for the basilisk - there is something more."*

Harry nodded. "There is... I don't know what yet, but I *feel* it - if that makes any sense at all." And then, in a voice that was not quite his own, Harry said, "Millions of lives rest upon your decision..."

*"You truly believe that?"*

"I have to; otherwise I think I'd go insane..." Harry whispered vaguely, tiring quickly now of this unexpected debate.

*"... You did not answer my question... are you afraid?"*

Harry sighed. "Of the damage I could do, yes. Of what I am and could be in the end... yes."

*"And can you see this end?"* the Voice of the Hat asked.

"No... I may not even live to see it," Harry replied. "And I'm not sure I want to. Not anymore."

*"Fear?"*

"Yes."

*"That... was an honest answer. I may have misjudged you."*

Harry contemplated removing the hat now, and just simply buying a new sword in Diagon Alley, but he decided against it. Something was nagging at him... the hat was kicking up too much of a fuss over the sword, there was something he didn't understand.

"There's more power in the sword than I know, isn't there?" he asked.

*"You are very perceptive, almost eerily so. Yes, the sword holds many secrets... and for you to wield it could lead to destruction."*

"I've used it before..."

*"Carelessly... but always with the best intentions. You have changed since then though, your knowledge of the universe and its workings has deepened. I- I don't know what to do!"*

"Trust me."

*"I... shouldn't. Leave me!"*

Nodding, Harry removed the Hat from his head and light filled his eyes. He turned and placed it gently down on Dumbledore's desk, and turned to face the old man himself.

"You were in there for ten minutes, Harry," the Headmaster said. "What happened?"

Harry scratched the coarse stubble on his cheeks, a thing that was becoming a habit, and looked down to the Hat on the desk. It wasn't moving, or making any sign that it was still sentient at all.

"You couldn't hear me?" Harry asked. "The Hat and I got into a bit of an argument."



"I heard nothing."

Harry looked up briefly at the Headmaster. "That's probably for the best."

Turning back to the Hat, Harry let out a breath he hadn't realised he was holding as, with history being made at that moment, the glittering handle of the sword of Godric Gryffindor appeared from under the rim of the patched and frayed hat. On instinct, Harry reached forward with his left hand and pulled the blade clean out of the hat in one fluid movement. The silver caught the sunlight shining in through the west window, and for a moment Harry's face was alight with the reflected light.

"It appears your argument was successful," Dumbledore said, standing next to Harry and admiring the sword.

Harry didn't hear him. His attention was devoted solely to the blade. He ran the fingers of his right hand along the length of it, minding he didn't slice any of them off on the infinitely sharp edge. As with his original blade, when Harry held this one he felt something of the future it had wrought. A feeling of years fell upon him, and nothing but the blade could draw his gaze.

It passed though, as these things always do, and Harry turned to Dumbledore, both of them sporting a familiar twinkle in their eyes. Harry's was one of ambition, of what awaited them down in the Chamber. Dumbledore's was one of respect, and of amazement for the sword.

"When did you want to open the Chamber, Harry?" the Headmaster asked seriously.

Harry thought for a moment, and then shrugged. "No time like the present. Are you coming with me?"

Surprisingly, Dumbledore shook his head. "My first priority is to the students of this castle. I will keep them in the Great Hall for an extended lunch period. Understand this, Mr. Potter, nothing can leave that Chamber. If the basilisk should be set loose, it will be the end of Hogwarts."

Harry nodded. "I understand," he said, still holding the sword. Timidly, he tried to make it disappear into his arm - feeling for the familiar pull that this connection had created. He couldn't find it, and no wonder, it was a different sword.

Although he wondered if he could fuse it to himself as he had done the last one, but this time into his right arm. For all he knew the sword of Gryffindor was awaiting him in Dumbledore's office back in his own world, it wouldn't be practical to have two swords in the one arm - what would be the point?

So, placing the blade firmly on the Headmaster's desk, Harry took a few paces back across the room, and raised his *right* arm towards the sword. Trying to grasp some of the feeling that had allowed him to do this last time, he bent all of his thought towards the shimmering sword.

"Harry... what?" began Dumbledore, but stopped as the sword upon his desk began to glow with an ethereal light.

Beads of sweat appeared on Harry's forehead and his legs shook as power, pure and raw, was exchanged between blade and man. The office seemed to darken as the blade grew brighter, and a red glow emanated from the ruby upon the handle grip. The blade shimmered and for a small moment disappeared, and when this happened Harry felt a familiar tug in his right arm.

Long seconds stretched into minutes, and Harry's arm grew very hot as the blade shone deep, thrumming red now. Smoke rose from it and, with a final push of his mind, Harry wrenched his arm upwards and the sword disappeared in a flash of blue light. A second later and Harry felt his right arm grow heavier, but not uncomfortably so.

"What did you just do?" asked Dumbledore. "Did you bind...?"

"Yes," Harry answered, a small smile playing at the corner of his lips. Thinking quickly, he brought the sword forward from its hiding place, just hidden out of sight, and grasped the now cool metal strongly in his right hand. "Oh... I didn't realise until now how much I missed this."

With another thought, it was gone.

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"Dumbledore has informed the staff and the Great Hall will be locked and barred until two o'clock this afternoon. That's two and a half hours from now," Harry said quickly - formerly addressing the seven members of his squad as they stood to his attention outside of the girls' bathroom on the second floor of the castle. "This should be enough time to explore the Chamber, although I don't know how big it is. It sure is ugly though, so watch out for anything nasty in the darkness."

"And you say there's a basilisk down there?" Art Nuan asked, looking strangely unnerved. This man had never before shown emotion when discussing things with the team... but now, Harry saw fully justified fear shimmer across his eyes. He wasn't the only one showing it.

"I'm fairly certain it won't come until it's called - and I don't intend to call it," Harry replied. "But we could trigger something that will wake it. If that happens, leave it to me. *Don't* look at it directly in the eyes."

"This could be madness," Trask offered, as Harry pushed open the door to the female lavatory.

No one answered him, and in single file the eight of them crowded into the bathroom - allowing Harry to move forward toward the sink. As Harry approached the sink he knew would open upon the Chamber, he glanced down to the cubicles and looked for Moaning Myrtle. The stone floor was dry and sunlight streamed in through the high window, but there was no sign of the ghost.

*Could've been flushed down to the lake again,* Harry thought, and then turned all of his attention towards the sink.

"What now?" asked Sirius.

"Odd place for the entrance to the secret chamber of one of the darkest wizards to have ever lived," Grace mused, moving alongside Harry.

"Now I open the Chamber," Harry answered Sirius. "And I think Slytherin chose the best hiding place he could have for the entrance."

"Do we need our wands out?" asked Thomas Fright. "Or do you just push a button, Harry?"

"It only opens for a parseltongue," Harry replied.

"What? Commander... you're a parseltongue?" Sophia whispered, seeing Harry in a whole new light.

Shrugging, he replied, "Another long and complicated story. I wasn't born one though."

Behind Harry's back, the rest of his team exchanged quick, worried glances, as Harry ran his fingers across the cool marble of the basin.

Knowing what he was looking for, Harry briefly touched the small snake scratched onto the side of one of the copper taps. As he had done four, nearly five, years ago Harry turned the tap - it didn't work. With a small smile he concentrated on the snake now, swaying his head slightly so in the light it appeared to move.

"Open," he said.

Nothing happened.

"Did you all understand that?" he asked without turning around.

"English," Tonks said.

Harry sighed and then took a deep breath, concentrating all of his thought upon the snake. His eyes glazed over and blurred, stinging as he didn't blink. "Open," he said again, except this time not words, but a strange hissing crossed across his lips and a moment later the tap began to glow with a stunning white light.

Several of the squad members behind him gasped as the tap began to spin, and then in the next second the sink began to move - it sank right out of sight. A familiar large pipe was exposed, a pipe wide enough for a man to slide down.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Trask. "Who's first?"

Obviously, it was Harry. The slime covered pipe was just as he remembered it, right down to the smaller pipes that jutted out from it at regular intervals. He twisted and turned, his robes already slick with dirt and slime, and knew they had sunk lower than the dungeons, perhaps even miles under the castle already. Eventually the pipe levelled out, and Harry was thrown from it, landing on the damp ground with a wet thud.

The others followed, each one less slimy than the last. Harry cast a few small cleaning charms on himself and the others as they arrived, and began to explore their immediate surroundings.

"Where do you think we are?" asked Sophia.

"I think it drops us out under the lake," Harry answered her, noticing that the French woman had lost nothing of her icy composure, and was now expertly removing the slime from her tangled hair with a complex string of cleaning charms.

Without having to be asked, the eight of them lit their wands and stared into the darkness of the tunnel ahead. It was Harry who moved first, his footsteps echoing loudly on the damp floor.

The slime encrusted and dripping damp walls and stone floor made their going slow, as more than once one of them slipped, only to be caught by the fast reflexes of another. Harry led the way, and he knew no fear. He struggled to recall the last time he had been down here, and remembered what to expect.

*The giant shed skin probably won't be there, he thought, as the chamber hasn't been opened in fifty years.*

The darkness was all consuming, and no matter how bright Harry flared the light on the end of his wand, it never seemed to light the area more than five feet in front of him. Occasionally, one of the eight of them would step on some discarded animal bone - rat skulls for the most part, but none of them really cared to identify the deceased animals.

They came in time to the larger cave before the doors to the Chamber, and Harry was right to think the giant snake skin would not

be there - it wasn't. He knew the rocks around here were unstable though, and he warned his friends and allies of that. They progressed with care.

They walked through the area the skin should have been in and the dark tunnel turned once, and then turned again beyond. After a few minutes more of careful walking, the group turned around a final bend and Harry saw yet another familiar thing. The wall, the doors, of the Chamber upon which two entwined serpents were carved, their eyes set with the same glowing green emeralds.

"Merlin..." breathed Dermal. "Anyone got any firewhiskey?"

Sirius chuckled as Harry approached the door. There was no need to pretend that the snakes were real this time, and Harry hissed '*open*' in a low and faint voice. The serpents parted as the two door halves slid open, creaking on age old hinges that only magic maintained.

He was about to enter the chamber again, only this time it held no fear for him.

The seven members of Harry's hand picked squad stood behind their leader, wands grasped tightly, as the young teenager sent out balls of pure light to hang in the air along the length of the dark Chamber. They rose out of his palms, glowed extraordinarily for a second, before floating silently to rest in front of the heads of the carved serpents that supported the ceiling of the Chamber.

"Come on then," Harry whispered.

Their careful footsteps once again echoed loudly off of the floor, reverberating around the Chamber and making it sound as if there were several dozen people walking foolhardily towards a basilisk. Harry hoped the giant snake wasn't a light sleeper, as the noise was unavoidable.

Thanks to Harry's pure magic, there was a lot more light in the Chamber this time, and the large statue as high as the Chamber itself, standing against the back wall, came into view sooner than expected.

A giant face, ancient and monkey-like, sporting a long thin beard that fell almost to the bottom of the dark wizard's stone robes. *Salazar Slytherin...*

Harry's gaze was on the face and only the face though, more specifically the tightly closed mouth of the dark wizard. He let out a relieved sigh when he saw it closed.

"Okay," he whispered as he reached the carved feet of the statue, where Ginny had lain the last time Harry had been here, a world away. "Spread out. There are many pipes and anterooms, caves and passages leading around and about. You're searching for anything that could be useful. Sirius, Dermas, Sophia, Art, I want you four to remain in the main chamber here, and concentrate your search in this area.

"Fright, Grace, and Tonks, you're with me. We're heading into that cave there," said Harry, pointing to a wide opening to the left of the statue of Slytherin. "If you four find anything, give us a shout and we'll come running."

The cave tunnel that Harry entered was as dark as the one they had walked down to reach the Chamber, and Harry found himself casting more bright balls of magic from his palms into the darkness ahead of them. Broken pots, and shattered wooden tables littered the rough stone floor, and Harry thought they must have been at least a thousand years old.

"Do we have any idea what we're looking for?" asked Tonks, tripping slightly on a broken pot.

"Not a clue," Harry replied. "Look for parchment, scrolls, pictures on the walls. Anything!"

At length they turned a bend in the cave and lost sight of the faint glow of light that was the entrance to this tunnel, and Harry continued to light their way. He found himself hoping that the others would be all right, and hoped they didn't do anything to awake the snake. For some reason Harry didn't feel as confident that he could take it down now that he was here in the Chamber.

"Here's something," Thomas Fright drawled, flicking his wand towards a splintery piece of wood. It flew away carelessly and there on the ground was a dusty, and age old book. Its spine was long broken and as Harry carefully picked it up, several pages fell away and the cover fell to pieces in his hands.

He held what remained in his palms, and then inspiration struck. "*Reparo!*" he said, and white magic hit the book from underneath, and the spine, the parchment, a few of the loose pieces - all jumped up and began to mend themselves.

Magic could only do so much to something so old though, something so far gone. And as Harry knelt on that cold floor, flipping slowly through those old pages, it began to degrade again before his eyes. He had seen enough though, it was nothing.

"An old potions text," he said, with a hint of disappointment. "Useless..."

The four of them walked on further into the darkness for what must have been at least a quarter of a mile. The only light came from the tips of their wands and from the small balls of light that Harry was sending out before them. That potions text appeared to be the first of many as well, as soon the ground was littered with old books, degraded scrolls of parchment, and odd bits and pieces.

Glass crunched under their feet and Harry felt as if it would take days to search through all of this, and a lot could happen in that time. This excursion may just yet prove to be pointless, when suddenly the cave came to an abrupt end - a solid rock wall barring their way. Harry sent up several balls of light above him to highlight the wall, and when they did he gasped.

On the wall, written in letters of red fire that sprang to life as Harry placed his hand upon the cool stone, was a poem, of sorts, it was really a riddle. Tonks, Grace, and Fright stood behind Harry, their eyes scanning the lines of text and their brows furrowing in confusion.

Harry read it as well, his hand still resting on the wall, and then viciously he felt a jolt of... electricity... power, perhaps, shoot up his



arm and jar it at the socket. "Damn," he whispered, shaking his arm. "What was that?"

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"You found anything, Sirius?" Dernas called down the echoing Chamber, his voice bouncing off of the stone pillars and reverberating through the deserted tunnels.

"It's just a statue," Sirius shrugged, walking to the right around the large statue of Salazar Slytherin. "And an ugly one at that."

Art and Sophia were examining the dozen or so stone pillars that held the chamber up, fashioned in the images of serpents. There was writing upon them, written beneath the head, but it was a Latin phrase, and on every statue it said the same thing,

*Blood Be Pure*

"Do you think we will find anything, Mr. Nuan," Sophia asked the international bounty hunter, the hitwizard.

"Harry believes we will, and I find myself trusting him, even though we have barely spoken beyond war issues," Art replied, running his hand down the cool marble of one of the statues. "Perhaps that is why I trust him."

"That Auror, Tonks, she told me the Commander was from another world..." Sophia whispered. "Have you heard anything about this?"

Art walked through a few inches of water to examine a metal and rusted grate; it was a long moment before he answered Sophia. "I don't doubt it, Mademoiselle Tréla," he said. "We're caught up in something beyond us, and it all revolves around that boy, the Commander. I think whatever happens over the coming months, we're going to lose him one way or another."

Sophia opened her mouth to reply, but Sirius Black beat her to it. "HA!" he cried. "The eyes, the eyes on the ugly statue are glowing."

Sophia and Art moved quickly, fearing the worst, fearing the basilisk, and as they walked around the stone pillar and drew level with Sirius and Dermas in front of the statue, all four of them watched the glowing green eyes of the statue die, and the face begin to move. Slytherin's great mouth was slowly opening, half a century of dust was disturbed as this happened - and the four allies stared transfixed.

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Harry didn't touch the wall again, but he knew they had done something, triggered something. "Copy it, Grace," he said. "We've got to get back - now!"

His tone left no room for argument, and quickly Grace Arnair removed a scroll of parchment and a quill from within her robes pocket. Ink came next, and she quickly began to scrawl the poem, the riddle, from the wall onto the parchment. This is what she wrote:

*Greet                      part                      of                      eleven  
Leave                      a                      few                      from                      seven  
Ever                      you                      are                      true                      of                      blood  
None                      but                      the                      heir,                      is                      the                      one,  
Follow the lock, and wood*

*To the Fortress, you shall come*

Many months of confusion would follow these words, but for now a greater threat to the lives of Harry and his team was looming barely a quarter of a mile away from where Harry now stood.

"You got it?" he asked Grace quickly, feeling the very tension the stale air now held.

Grace checked her parchment and then the wall word for word, and then nodded. "Got it."

"Right," Harry said, turning away from the wall and starting off back down the dark tunnel. "Wands out!"

"What is going on?" asked Fright.

"I think we triggered something..." he replied.

Harry's lights were still glowing strong and their going down the tunnel was quick. Glass and old ceramic pots were crushed under his feet as he ran, and a minute later he heard a scream over the sound of his own loud breathing.

He stopped, because the scream seemed to have come from both ahead of him, and behind. He turned quickly and saw that Tonks, Grace, and Fright had fallen behind and were only just now catching up. It was ahead of him then, and not wasting another second, Harry sprinted back down the tunnel, just as a familiar voice cried,

"COMMANDER!"

Half a minute later and Harry felt the ground shake as something large impacted upon it up ahead. There was no doubt in his mind now that something, probably his touching of that wall, had awoken the Basilisk. A defence measure, probably placed there by Slytherin. Only the heir should find his fortress, and the heir could control the basilisk, so Riddle would have had no problem with waking the beast fifty years ago.

"HARRY!" called Tonks, as finally, a minute and a half after they had abandoned the riddle wall, he, Grace, Fright, and Tonks emerged back out into the poorly lit Chamber.

Harry analysed the situation in a second, seeing the coiled green snake slowly uncoiling and rising from where it had fallen from the now open mouth of the Slytherin statue. He saw Sirius, Dermas, Art, and Sophia staring transfixed at the massive poisonous green snake, which luckily hadn't raised its head yet.

*The King of Serpents was back...*

"RUN!" Harry shouted, shooting sparks out of his wand as he began to move, crossing the Chamber towards the snake. He was too far away though, and it was Sirius that finally began to move - and the other three next to him followed his lead. They wisely turned tail and ran, heading back down the Chamber towards the entrance doors.

Harry knew from experience though that they wouldn't make it even halfway down that ill-fated Chamber. The Basilisk had raised itself high in the air, its great blunt head was almost brushing the stone roof between two gigantic pillars.

*Christ*, Harry thought, and immediately lowered his gaze, now staring at the dusty Chamber floor. He could hear the footsteps of Sirius and the others retreating though, and then he heard nothing but the loud hiss, that was a shriek, from the basilisk as it took off down the Chamber after them.

Harry bit his lip as he felt and heard that large slithering bulking mass move, and then instinctively looked up to see the large snake shrieking and moving with graceful ease down after his four allies. *Oh no you don't...*

Tonks, Grace, and Fright were standing behind Harry, gazing in awe at the large snake that they could only see the back of. "They're dead..." Fright managed.

"No..." Harry replied, and then, surprising them all, began to run after the Basilisk - which now moved two hundred and fifty feet away.

"HARRY!" called Grace. "DON'T- OH MY!"

In the blink of an eye, Harry transformed into the mighty griffin. His claws and paws hitting the floor on the run, and increasing his speed ten fold. To Harry the change was instantaneous, and by now the most natural thing in the world, and he resisted the urge to cry from his hooked eagle beak, as that may make the snake turn - no, he merely gained speed and closed in on the basilisk.

Flight was impossible in this enclosed space, which held little air as it was. Harry instinctively knew this, just like he knew he had the power in his back legs to leap at least twenty five feet into the air. Those lion legs were hard, strong, magical, and would have made good armour.

In his griffin form, Harry could move faster than the serpent, and in less than ten seconds he was running just behind its slithering tail, being careful to stay out of sight. His sharp eagle eyes picked up the

forms of Sirius, Sophia, Dermas, and Art, and he put on another burst of speed, his adrenalin on high.

He had just ran passed the end of the thick green tail when the basilisk shrieked a hiss again, and Harry saw Sirius fall, tripping Dermas and Sophia as he did. *Bugger*, he thought, and knew he now had to act.

He was travelling at nearly seventy kilometres an hour, and while still on the run, he braced his hind legs. With his heightened sense of smell he could almost *taste* the stink of the basilisk, and then, just as he reached the part of the beast where it's 'neck' arched up and rose its head from the ground, Harry pounced.

Harry pounced with enough force to break through strengthened steel, and with his front claws caught the basilisk high near its head, always mindful never to look directly into the eyes. Both powerful animals cried and roared as Harry's jump forced the fast moving basilisk off course and sent both of them slamming into three of the stone pillars that held the Chamber strong.

*CRACK!* The old stone gave way underneath the combined weights of Harry and the basilisk, and large chunks of stone began to fall in clouds of dust from the broken pillars. The basilisk writhed against Harry, who had inadvertently spread his wings in an effort to stay aloft and grasp onto the snake.

That... was impossible though. The hide was impenetrable. Harry's eagle claws could not grip it, ever. He was only still up on the beast because its head had collided hard with the stone wall, and that had bent its body sideways, making a beam of sorts that held Harry.

Beneath, but unbeknownst to Harry, Sirius and the others were again moving and now avoiding large pieces of falling stone. Behind him Grace, Fright, and Tonks couldn't approach, as the basilisk was now throwing its weight around and the tail was swinging dangerously across the Chamber, knocking out more support pillars.

Harry screeched and the snake hissed, finally doing what Harry knew it would do, and mercilessly flinging its head up and throwing Harry threw the air. Still in his griffin form, Harry hit the Chamber floor hard,

and rolled three times before smashing into one of the broken stone pillars. Barely two seconds later and the basilisk swung its entire back end into his form, knocking him left down the Chamber towards Sirius, Dernas, Sophia, and Art.

The blow knocked the wind from Harry's massive lungs, and did, in fact, send him sailing passed the retreating members of his squad. Blurrily he saw Sirius' eyes widen as a griffin flew past him in a spinning ball of feathers and pain. Harry hit the Chamber floor again about twenty feet in front of the others, and by the time he did he was in human form.

"Ow..." he managed, looking back down the Chamber, keeping his eyes averted towards the ground and away from the basilisk's, which was screeching again as it resumed the chase. He saw the approaching feet of Dernas first, and Harry knew he had to make a choice.

*The sword?* he wondered... *no, it isn't blind. I can't fight it if I can't look at it.* Dernas was now only a few feet away, leading the small group of four. Harry saw the solution then, and couldn't help but smile slightly. *Plan B then...*

Flicking his wrist, Harry brought his wand into his hand and stood up on one knee, looking directly into Dernas' eyes.

"RUN, HAR-" began Dernas, but he never got a chance to finish as Harry cast something upon him.

*"BESTIOLA ACREDULA!"*

*Sorry, Dernas....*

A transfiguration spell, as death shrieked again - closing in fast further down the Chamber. Trask gasped and stopped running, as his body was twisted and transformed painlessly and unexpectedly. The other three, momentarily surprise at the sight, stopped and stared at Dernas with their mouths hanging open.

Two seconds later and where Dernas had stood only a moment ago, was a.... rooster.

*Genius or insanity? The next few moments would decide that.*

The king of serpents was upon them, rearing back high as Harry crouched down, putting his hands over his head in defence. The beast hissed again, shrieked again, and Harry smiled as he detected a burst of fear in that voice. He looked up briefly to see Trask, the rooster, opening his beak, and then he saw the basilisk falter.

And if the situation hadn't been so deadly serious, it may have been funny to watch a gigantic snake that weighed more than a few tonnes, try to turn on a dime in fear of a small rooster.

The basilisk hit the wall again, in its haste, and the very ground shook with that impact. *You can't run now, you bastard...* Harry thought as the entire length of the snake jerked and flipped, knocking on more support pillars - pillars that held this time - and screeched in terror, already realising its fate.

Derms the rooster crowed, he crowed true and loud, and the basilisk froze instantly and its thrashing stopped. The beast lay slumped against the wall it had fallen upon. Dead, lifeless eyes stared at Harry now, but they had no effect. *Amazing*, Harry thought as he stood in the now completely silent Chamber - silent that was, except for the continued crows from the rooster. *A fifty foot beast brought down in a second... last time was just unnecessarily hard!*

"Good God!" breathed Sirius, limping over and resting his hand on Harry's shoulder. "Is that Derms?"

Harry smiled again, and then laughed. It was the first time he had laughed in what felt like years. He was still chuckling slightly as he pointed his wand at the rooster, and muttered the counter transfiguration spell. Trask appeared in place of the rooster a small moment later, sitting on his rear in a crumpled heap.

"Bloody hell..." he managed, breathing heavily, putting a hand on his chest. "Is your life always this much fun, Harry?"

Harry offered Trask his hand and pulled the blade-master to his feet. "Most of the time everything's a lot harder. We were lucky today."

Trask smiled. "Well I guess it could have been worse. Is everyone okay?"

Grace, Tonks, and Fright were jogging up the length of the Chamber towards them, smiles on their faces and relief in their eyes. Sophia, Art, and Sirius had crowded around Dernas and Harry. Everyone was all right, everyone was alive, except for the Basilisk, which was still slumped against the Chamber wall, its full length coiled around the base of a pillar.

"I think my ankle may be sprained," Sirius said. "Hurt like hell to run those final few feet."

Harry nodded, once again assuming the role of leader. "We're going, Sirius. Grace, do you have that parchment?"

"Of course," the charms expert replied, as she, Tonks, and Fright reached them.

"Then let's get out of here. Trask, Portkey's to the Hospital Wing please."

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*Of the many fearsome beasts and monsters that roam our land, there is none more curious or more deadly than the Basilisk, known also as the King of Serpents. This snake, which may reach gigantic size, and live many hundreds of years, is born from a chicken's egg, hatched beneath a toad. Its methods of killing are most wondrous, for aside from its deadly and venomous fangs, the Basilisk has a murderous stare, and all who are fixed with the beam of its eye shall suffer instant death. Spiders flee before the Basilisk, for it is their mortal enemy, and the Basilisk flees only from the crowing of the rooster, which is fatal to it.*

Harry silently thanked his Hermione again for finding that passage in some unknown text in the library four years ago, as he sat in his chair around the circular meeting table of his team. They were discussing the riddle on the wall of the Chamber, had been discussing it for the last three hours with the aid of magical location books and maps.



Greet part of eleven  
 Leave a few from seven  
 Ever you are true of blood  
 None but the heir, is the one,  
 Follow the lock, and wood

He tossed the words over in his mind, searching for a hidden meaning. *I'm no good at this...* Harry thought, glancing silently at the others, noting the looks of confusion upon their own faces.

Harry nodded. "Tomorrow... it can wait until then."

There was no doubt in Harry's mind that he would one day soon enter Voldemort's hidden fortress, and end this war. It was just a matter of time now, as was his return to his own world. *And to another war*, he thought. *The war I should be fighting*. Sighing, Harry removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. Sleep would be rough that night, as he was out of dreamless sleep potion. But that only numbed the dreams; they were beyond blocking out now. His mind wouldn't let him forget the horrors he had seen and done in his past.

The other witches and wizards in the room were discussing something but Harry was no longer listening, he knew he should be - as it was his job as leader, but his thoughts were elsewhere. Namely, on his argument with the Sorting Hat. It was more than just for sorting though, Harry knew that now. In its own right, the Hat was a Guardian of sorts - it shaped the magical future by judging character.

*The path your soul walks is dark - and growing darker with your choices.*

*The hat really saw that in me... Harry thought. Is it true?*

The obvious answer was that he couldn't know. He was doing all he could to win a war he shouldn't have had to fight, but that was his choice. He protected *good* people, he killed out of necessity. But yesterday in the alley....

*Why didn't I just stun that bounty hunter...?*

Harry quickly shook his head. NO!. Those thoughts led to madness, paved the road to insanity. He wouldn't delve any deeper... yet. Whatever the coming months held he would face it with the same will to survive and unbreakable determination that had seen him through this far. He could do no less.

There were things that needed to be done in the now though - weren't there always? - and tossing the piece of parchment with the riddle on it aside, Harry stood. He winced slightly, as his chest was bruised from that fight with the basilisk, but it was nothing new. He could handle it.

"I have to go send an owl," he said, a detached look in his eyes. "I'll probably see you all tomorrow. Good work today."

Saying nothing else, Harry walked out of the room - leaving seven confused allies behind in the low torchlight.

"What do you think is wrong with him?" asked Sirius.

"Might be a bit tired," offered Dermal. "He did wrestle a basilisk a few hours ago."

"He's troubled," said Art Nuan, the wand-for-hire. It has been well established that Art rarely spoke, but he did listen and watch - very well. He was a good judge of character, of emotion, of pain. He saw a lot in Harry's eyes and movements... the things he said, the way he said them, how he responded to questions and events.

"Troubled... How?" asked Tonks, leaning back in her chair and folding her arms across her chest.

Art waved his hand and shook his head. "I do not know, but I believe he may be questioning his sanity."

"What if this affects his leadership capabilities?" Sophia Tréla voiced her opinion. "He is, after all, just a boy."

Dermas couldn't help the scowl that crossed his face. "A boy! How many boys do you know that duel Dark Lords and tackle basilisks?"

Sophia bristled. "I am only thinking of the group, as a whole," she said. "We cannot function with a broken leader. It may lead to death."

"None of us are in a position to approach him about this," Thomas Fright said. "We don't know him well enough. What about his father?"

Sirius sighed. If there was a problem, Harry wouldn't likely talk to James. He had only known James Potter for a month... It was then that Sirius realised that Harry knew no one on this entire planet. He recognised faces, but they didn't know him. He was alone, no friends, no family... nothing. Sirius found himself hoping that there was nothing wrong.

"Let's get back to this riddle," he said, clearing his throat.

\*\*\*\*

*Mr. Elendil,*

*I have the item we spoke of. How do you wish to proceed?*

*Regards,*

*Harry Potter*

Harry found himself missing Hedwig dearly as he tied his small note to an unfamiliar brown tawny school owl. He knew that someone would be taking care of her, Ginny perhaps, but he missed her nonetheless. It was strange how attached he had become to the

snowy white bird. She had been his only constant ever since his eleventh birthday, the only one never to abandon him. She had even been there during those long and dreaded summers spent at the Dursleys. That, along with everything else these days, had ended in tragedy.

Night had fallen on the world as Harry let the owl fly loose into the sky, and it was soon lost to the star scattered darkness. Ambling slowly up through the castle, Harry came in time to his... retreat... from the hectic day to day life he led. Ascending the stairs of the Astronomy Tower, the torches on the walls flaring into flame as he did so, Harry walked out onto the balcony - and gazed once more at the majesty of the clear night sky.

It was gone eleven o'clock now, nearing midnight, and Harry carelessly threw his legs over the edge of the parapet and sat down tiredly on the stone wall. The moon was half full and swimming gently across the sky, as Harry wrapped his arms tightly into his robes. It was cold up there, and he usually didn't feel it... but tonight something was different - not with Harry, but with the world.

*I wish I'd gone and risked the dreamless sleep potion,* he thought, as a gust of wind blew the messy hair on his head every which way. *Perhaps I should just head for bed....*

*The stars incline, but do not impel.*

Harry gasped as a bolt of pain rushed down the length of his curse scar, and he pulled his hand out of his robes to touch his forehead. There was no doubt this time, as there had been in Diagon Alley, he had definitely just felt scar pain. The skin was still tingling and warm under his touch.

*Change or die.*

Sighing, Harry dropped his right arm to rest at his side, contemplating this latest development. Did this mean that the Voldemort of his world was active again, slaughtering unchecked and unchallenged? Harry didn't think so. Perhaps he was recovering after being attacked by pure magic, getting stronger. He had said that their link, their shared minds, could run beyond one world.

*For rarely man escapes his destiny.*

A sense of longing suddenly fell over Harry, and he wanted nothing more than to return to his own world at that moment, and forget the darkness that was creeping into his heart, turning it into stone as it moved to destroy his soul. He wanted to see familiar faces, that knew him, that loved him. Above all he wanted to see Ginny and, of course, Ron and Hermione.

Sadness covered him like a dark blanket then, and Harry didn't know why but he raised his right palm towards the sky as it began to glow. With a thought, and a barely uttered word, he created a stunning white rose, which he grasped between the thorns once the magic was done.

*Perhaps the good inside of him would win.*

The rose seemed to glow like his palm had as he held it, and small drops of white light fell from the centre of the large blooming bud and floated through the night sky towards the ground over two hundred feet below. To Harry it looked like the rose was crying. Nevertheless, it was beautiful, and now Harry recalled seeing it in his dreams yesterday. The most peaceful dream he had had in months.

It was so light, and Harry moved it almost with reverence over his lap, so that the drops of magic fell onto him. When each one did, it warmed him through and a small smile spread across his face, wiping away the troubles of life and making him appear the sixteen years old he actually was.

A single petal also fell away, much like the magic, and that fluttered away into the darkness. Turning the rose in his hand, Harry caught the tip of his finger on a razor sharp thorn, and drew blood. The pain was fleeting though, and the trickle of red that now ran down the green stem ran unnoticed.

*All, soon or late, are doomed that path to tread.*

Such a beautiful thing was not meant to last, not for Harry. It was then, as his shining eyes glazed over with tears that would never be shed, that the strange hazy darkness claimed his vision once again. Harry

gasped in shock as he felt an amazing and huge sickness that wasn't his own.

A feeling not unlike being in the Stream with the Guardian, at the mercy of existence, washed over him, and he felt a power that was stronger and older than anything he had previously encountered. And then for a moment in time he thought he saw a golden beam shooting over the horizon, connected to... coming from his forehead.

It all ended, and Harry coughed as an uncontrollable surge of power shot through and out of him, burning out of his right palm. His sight fully returned and he swayed upon the parapet, still holding the rose in his bloody streaked hand. Except now the rose held no beauty, as it was in flames.

True uncertainty flashed through Harry's mind as he watched the rose burn and die, and soon the flames licked at his fingers holding the stem. Regretfully, Harry let go the burning rose and it, just like the tears of magic, fell through the air towards the dark ground.

*Death hath so many doors to let out life.*

Confusion and... fear... tore at Harry as he watched the flickering flames on the castle grounds below finally burn out and grow dark. *What had just happened? What is happening to me? What is **wrong** with me?* The confusion left him but the fear did not. It wasn't fear for himself though... oh no... he was far beyond that.

It was fear that there was absolutely nothing wrong with him, and that there was something wrong with everything else... or more specifically, the magic that held this world, and all others, together. Something, somewhere, had gone wrong - and was he the cause...?

*In nature there are neither rewards nor punishment - there are consequences.*

He had defied the logic and law of everything that has ever existed since the beginning. No one ever said that there would not be consequences. Maybe not for Harry, as he may be the only one who could change, fix, the problem, but consequences for everyone else.

It was a frightening thought, and all the more so because Harry believed it held truth.

*This is too big for me, he thought, glaring up at the Planet of War, at Mars. I don't know what's happening, but whatever it is, it's worsening - and I can't stop it. No one can help me... I know next to nothing, and yet I know more than anyone else.*

Harry was shivering now, and it wasn't from the cold - no. It was nerves, mingled with doubt and pain. He alone in this world, perhaps in all worlds, saw that something big was approaching fast, just over the horizon. Whatever it was it was unavoidable, it was real, and it was a greater threat than Death himself.

The thoughts that plagued Harry's mind now though, was one of the cost. What would he have to sacrifice in order to face and defeat this new threat...? Would there be enough time to? How many would die on the way?

Only one fact remained certain now to Harry, and that was an end was revealing itself finally. What it was, and where it would lead, remained dark, but it was there... and, for now, that was enough.

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## Chapter 15 - White Roses and the Moon

I walk a lonely road  
The only one that I have ever known  
Don't know where it goes  
But it's home to me and I walk alone

~~ Green Day

Life... for what its worth... is an impossibility. We, upon this small blue sphere, are an impossibility within an impossible universe. We exist in our minds, we live dreams and fantasies within our consciousness. We are not alone though - we're never alone -

outside of our minds. Reality, unfortunately, is the one thing that when we stop thinking about it, won't die or go away.

Story... is what makes a universe. Entire worlds, illusions, created from the mind of a life form - affecting reality, the greatest illusion of all. These creations are another form of reality, untouchable reality. They are fantasy, different from our preconception of what is real, but in the end they are all that matters...

*Every story must have an ending.*

Occasionally, life can get caught up in a tale, a horror, so strong, so earth shattering, that even reality struggles to deny its existence. This is, usually, when Magic steps in to fix the problem, and avert the End. For all else to cower under the prospect of the End, whenever and whatever that will be, true courage and bravery has to be found - and utilised, so that the story may continue.

But what if Magic was the cause of the problem this time.... what if the very force created to protect the continued existence of *everything*, had been abused and broken - with untold consequences for this mistake. How would anyone know that the protector had become the destroyer?

Creatures of all realms, of all planes of existence, mortal and immortal, are mostly unaware of this unprecedented chaos that is about to befall them... yet there are a few, who sense the coming of



the End; and there is one who can stop it. Existence, in any of its forms, has fallen onto the shoulders of a mortal.

All of existence, everything... time and space... life and death... the Boundary and the Stream, are now all caught up in the same flow towards the End. But there is one... who has the strength of will to swim against it.

Reality has darkened, Fate and Destiny have been abandoned - worlds will fall, life will end, chaos will rule... but Hope will never die. So begins the journey towards the End - it is real, it isn't going away...

*This* is now reality. No one can help you! Just sit back and watch the darkness come....

\*\*\*\*

*April 21<sup>st</sup>, 1997*

*Just over five months until  
the Autumnal Equinox*

The first sound that reached his ears was that of sharpened metal impacting against an equal piece of sharpened metal. The second sound was that of two people panting as blow after devastating blow was exchanged with the blades.

Sirius Black pushed open the double doors of the Room of Requirement, and stepped into a large stone chamber, with a raised duelling platform running forty feet down to the other side of the room. Having arrived five minutes late to the squad meeting, he walked over to his companions, watching in awe at the fast paced movements of Harry and Trask up on the duelling platform.

"You're good," said Dermas, pausing for a moment to wipe the sweat off his brow. "Who'd you say taught you?"

Harry smiled. "A crazy Irishman."

Dermas panted and frowned, but Harry didn't give him a chance to respond. Moving like the wind, he struck his blade down fast, the

sword of Gryffindor, and wasn't the least bit surprised when Dernas responded twice as fast, and brought his own blade up to deflect the blow. They began again.

"How long have they been at it?" Sirius asked, coming alongside Tonks.

"Quarter of an hour," she replied, her hair dark green to compliment her robes. "You should have seen them ten minutes ago - it was like a blur. I didn't think it was possible that two people could move so fast!"

Sirius's eyes widened as he saw Harry lean back, as Trask's blade swung an inch away from his exposed throat. "That was close..."

Thomas Fright, Art Nuan, Sophia Tréla, and Grace Arnair all stood nearby, talking quietly and watching the duel. Today's meeting was supposed to be a round of practice duels, but Sirius hadn't heard anything about swordplay. He hoped he would not have to try it.

Harry spun on his heel and defended against another merciless blow from Dernas, who was beginning to tire. Harry supposed that was his only real advantage over Trask, his youth. Trask had sixty more years on him - and he was feeling it now. For ability with a blade though, Harry was barely hanging on, and he was all about defence now. Dernas may have been old, but with age comes skill.

This duel was purely swords; no magic was to be used. Harry knew he was likely to lose in the next few minutes, perhaps even seconds, but to be able to hold on for so long - fifteen minutes - against one of the most accomplished blade masters in the world was extraordinary to him.

Of course, Harry had another advantage. Dernas had taught him for hours a day everyday for three months, and Harry knew his style - where he was weak, where he was strong, what stance he preferred. Those had been literally pounded into Harry, when he had practised with wooden sticks down by the lake.

For a moment, over confidence claimed Harry as Trask feinted to his left, and moving quickly he brought his blade along Dernas' right side.

Not quick enough - he had barely raised his sword higher than the knees before Trask's blade was lying against his throat.

"Checkmate..." breathed Dernas.

Harry surrendered, and returned his sword out of sight with a thought. Dernas smiled and clapped him on the shoulder as he sheathed his own blade. Applause came from the nearby squad members, and Harry jumped down off the platform - requiring a goblet of water as he did.

"Did you get that riddle to the Ministry, Tonks?" he asked the female Auror, quickly gulping his water.

"Yes. To a man we can trust."

"Good... what did he think?"

Tonks shrugged with a sigh, and that was all the answer Harry needed. The coming months would be long and hard... dark and getting darker... but he had already known that. He turned to Sophia.

"You were in Knockturn Alley again last night, Sophia. What's the word?"

Sophia turned to face him, sweeping her blonde hair back as she did. "Nothing new to report, Commander," she said. "Death Eater recruitment is still on the rise."

Harry nodded. "Then we have to get ready. Sorry, Fright, no duelling today."

"Why not?" asked Fright.

"Voldemort's going to make a move soon - we have to be ready. Can I ask you and Dernas to head into Diagon Alley and purchase the rest of the supplies for the trunks. I'll give you the payment parchment."

"What makes you so sure he's going to attack?" asked Sirius.

"Experience," replied Harry. "Voldemort's not a fool. We're not going to have much longer to strengthen our defences. He's going to hit us, and hit us hard where it will hurt the most."

There was almost a persuasive quality to the straight forward and completely honest way Harry spoke, that made everyone who heard him believe what he said just because it was *he* who had said it. Harry wasn't aware of this though, and it still came as a surprise to him sometimes when he really thought about the loyalty he commanded in this world, and the other.

"And where is that?" Dermal asked, sitting down on the duelling platform.

"Most likely the Ministry -"

Tonks stepped forward. "He wouldn't dare!"

Harry wiped the sweat from his brow and shrugged. "He's realising that he can't have the world anymore, I've shown him that, so he's going to destroy it... without ever leaving his Fortress. Why do you think recruitment is up?"

None of them spoke. The truth was obvious now that Harry had laid it all out... all that remained was what they were going to do about it.

"The Ministry is well-guarded," began Tonks. "Aurors, wards-"

"The Ministry," cut in Harry, "is infested with Death Eaters. We have to assume the wards are useless."

Tonks bristled. "The Ministry hasn't been attacked in twenty years of war," she said. "What makes you so sure it will be, Harry?"

Harry could see that Tonks was angry, and he really could not understand why. Misguided faith in a system that was failing, perhaps... "Because I know how Voldemort thinks... I know what he'll do. The best we can do is set up some new wards of our own design. I'll go and see the Minister about it today, when I give my report."

Art Nuan cleared his throat. "Watch your back, Commander," he said. "Active bounty hunters have been sighted up and down the country, in Hogsmeade even. And not all of them work alone."

"One of us should accompany you today," Sophia suggested.

Harry frowned. "I don't need a bodyguard."

Sophia offered him a rare smile; it warmed her otherwise cold face. "Of course you don't. I never said you did... perhaps just an extra pair of eyes."

Not in the mood to argue, Harry conceded. "If you want to come with me, you can, Sophia," he replied, pressing a hand to his forehead. He had developed quite a headache all of a sudden. "I'm only going to the Ministry and back again. Two hours at the most."

"I shall accompany you," she said, nodding her head slightly.

Harry waved his hand indifferently. "The rest of you do what you do best. Maybe go with Fright and Dermas into Diagon Alley and get an extra wand. I'll probably be back here before you are."

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"So..." Sophia whispered as she and Harry walked down the warm grounds towards the castle gates, and the ward line. "Is it true you were... not... that you, that you are from another world?"

Harry's robes swept around behind him in the warm wind and he gazed briefly at the French woman walking next to him, before turning away and looking out over the grounds. He saw the students of the younger years entering the greenhouses, examining some creature over by Hagrid's hut, and flying around on their brooms over at the Quidditch pitch with Madam Hooch. It could have been his world, it was so alike... and yet it didn't feel right.

"Did Sirius or Tonks tell you that?" he asked quietly, gazing at the ground now, thoughtfully.

"That does not matter..."

Harry chuckled. "No... I suppose it doesn't. Do you believe it?"

Sophia's reply was prompt. "I have to say I don't. It just seems so impossible, so... wrong."

Shoving his hands into his pockets and staring at her briefly, Harry said, "Nothing is impossible. I live by those words. If you can imagine it and even if you can't, it probably exists... like another world, identical in so many ways except the ones that matter... Nothing is impossible."

"Oh no?" she said, smiling again. "Have you ever tried to slam a revolving door? I guarantee you it cannot be done."

Harry thought about that for a moment. "Point taken. Are you... did you grow up as a Muggle?"

Sophia nodded as they veered away from the dusty path slightly to cut across the green grass towards the gates. "My father was a Muggle. He was the Muggle liaison officer between the French Auror division and Muggle government. My mother was an Auror; I grew up in the military, but attended Muggle school until I was fourteen. Where did you grow up?"

Harry couldn't help but laugh harshly at that question, but then he scowled. "In a closet... but that's another story altogether. It has nothing to do with what we were talking about."

Sophia bit her bottom lip, and then nodded. "What were we talking about?"

"You asked me if I was from another world," Harry whispered.

"Ah yes... and you never truly answered."

Harry shrugged and ran a hand through his already messy hair. "I guess I didn't. Do you want the long answer or the short answer? If you want the long answer it'll have to wait until we're done at the Ministry, because it will take an hour or two."

"The short answer for now then, Commander," Sophia said, putting her hand on his arm and pulling them both to a stop. He turned to look her in the eyes, and Harry recognised instantly the sharp probe of a legimens in his mind.

*She's trying to read my mind*, Harry thought, slightly amused. With a thought he scrounged together his few Occlumency skills and developed a small shield against her *attack*. "The short answer," he then said. "Is yes, I am from another world."

Harry knew Sophia would not detect a lie in his mind, so he didn't need to see the shock on her face as he continued to walk on towards the gates. Sophia was justifiably silent from then on, and the two of them Apparated to the Ministry a minute later as they crossed the ward line.

The Minister was entertaining the American ambassador of the International Confederation when Harry and Sophia arrived outside of his office ten minutes later. Crouch was informed of their arrival and they took a seat. *The Minister will see you shortly*, his young secretary had told them forty five minutes ago now.

Eventually they did get in to see Crouch, and Harry reported the finer details of what had occurred that week - telling the Minister everything he knew about the attack on Trafalgar Square, their journey into the Chamber of Secrets, and the workings of his squad.

He also informed the Minister of his... hunch... that the Ministry would soon be attacked. Crouch was not an idiot, thank God for small miracles, and he saw the danger the old wards were in with the Ministry in the current state it was. They would all be slaughtered if the wards came down and the Death Eaters attacked in their hundreds. Crouch would see Dumbledore about getting some new wards erected, keyed under his, Harry's, and Dumbledore's magical signature.

They were also informed by Crouch, and he had just learnt this himself, that the International Confederation had granted more than aid to Britain, finally, and that a committee was to be formed to 'assess' the situation of the country and the war - to decide whether

or not to commit Aurors of foreign Ministries to what had previously been referred to as *Britain's problem*.

Harry, of course, would be interviewed in time by this specialist committee. *Another attempt at control, perhaps*. He had thought that as soon as the words had left Crouch's mouth, and didn't doubt the truth in it. But then again he would not presume to know for sure. It seemed like too little too late though, and the coming months would decide that.

Two and a half hours after arriving at the Ministry of Magic, Harry and Sophia strode out of the Minister's office and headed back down two floors to the elevator, which they took to the atrium and then walked over thoughtfully to the Apparation point. On the way, a tall man with a hard face bumped into Sophia, accidentally, he muttered a small apology and then disappeared into the thick crowds. Neither of them spared him another moment of thought.

No sooner had they stepped up onto the black strips, than almost imperceptibly Harry caught sight of something out of the corner of his left eye that didn't quite fit. His instinct and reflexes kicked in, and he didn't make any sign he had seen anything... but there was something. The hairs on the back of his neck were on end and he shivered.

*Okay... he thought. What now...? Can't lead them back to Hogwarts. And what if it's a bounty hunter... Art had said that they didn't care for the law, international or otherwise. He couldn't risk confronting them in the Atrium, it was too crowded.* Turning to Sophia, he said, "Do you want to get some lunch in Muggle London?" he asked her calmly. "And I can tell you the long story."

Sophia frowned. It was an odd request, what was the Commander - He was staring at her strangely, his eyes dark and unreadable. But then maybe that's what he wanted... "Sure," she said. "Do you know anywhere?"

Harry shrugged, and then raised his hand to scratch the left side of his face. As his hand shielded his eyes he winked ever so slightly, and Sophia had no doubt anymore that something was wrong. "We'll



have to head to Gringotts first then," he said, louder than was necessary. "So I can get some Muggle cash...."

Sophia nodded, and then the two of them Disapparated with two loud pops. They reappeared instantly on the other side of London, outside the Wizarding bank Gringotts on Diagon Alley.

"What is going on-" Sophia began to ask, but a glare from Harry silenced her.

"We're going to get lunch," he said, feeling the wave of air somewhere nearby that meant they had been followed in their Apparation, and by more than one person. He saw that Sophia recognised it for what it was as well.

Harry held the door to the bank for Sophia and cast a lazy, almost cursory glance back at the Alley behind him, trying to look uninterested in the dozens of people moving and talking up and down it. What he saw didn't alleviate his concerns, it confirmed them. Three wizards, and Harry only spared them a millisecond of a glance, were pretending to inspect something in the window of the Magical Menagerie forty feet away, but Harry knew they were watching his reflection in the glass. Sighing, he entered the bank after Sophia.

"At least three," Harry whispered to Sophia, as he removed one of the few payment parchment slips he had in his pocket. He moved over to the nearest desk and dipped the fine quill there in the ink pot and then scrawled in an amount in galleons. He then guided Sophia over to the nearest counter and waited as the goblin at the desk handled a withdrawal, before stepping up and handing over the slip.

"I'd like this in Muggle pounds please," said Harry.

"Very well," the goblin responded, only once looking at Harry - the Ministry seal and signature of the Minister on the slip was enough for the small creature. "Fifty galleons at the current exchange rate is three hundred pounds, minus five percent for our fee. Is this acceptable?"

"Fine," Harry waved his hand impatiently as the goblin hopped down off of his chair and over to the heavy safe a few feet away.

A minute later and then Harry pocketed the cash, turning to Sophia and nodding. "Once we're outside, Apparate to that place in London we were at the other day," he said, putting the meaning into his eyes. "We should lose them as soon as we can, I don't want to have to kill anyone today."

Sophia nodded and together they exited the busy bank and headed back out onto the sunny, crowded streets of Diagon Alley. Not wasting a second, Harry and Sophia Disapparated again, and reappeared several miles away at Trafalgar Square.

"Well I don't think they can follow now," said Harry, standing on the outskirts of the broken Square. It took him only seconds to remember all that had occurred here, and notice how different it looked now. He took a minute to remove his robes, Sophia did the same, so they wouldn't stand out in the crowd. Harry was down to a shirt and jeans, as was Sophia. He was slightly concerned about his visible wand holster, but didn't bother to hide it.

"Bounty hunters, do you think?" asked Sophia.

"I do," Harry nodded. The entire disaster area had been taped off with yellow police tape, and there was a guard stationed every few feet along the length of the Square. Most of it had been cleaned up in the few days since the attack, but the stench of death still hung in the air. That much was as clear to Harry as the glasses on his face.

Detectives and officials scampered over piles of rubble and debris in and around the Square, and Harry noticed that not many Muggles were walking about at this time, even though he knew there should be.

So as not to be conspicuous, he and Sophia began to walk away from the area, heading down past the Art gallery and along the perimeter of the Square and coming in time to the church of St. Martin's. Harry saw that the front of this old stone building had been peppered, for use of a better word, with shrapnel and debris from the explosion. Several of the old windows were cracked and smashed; the brickwork was in no better condition. It was a damn tragedy.

"I would still like to hear the long story, Commander," Sophia said as they walked side by side. "How about lunch?"

Harry shrugged. "Call me Harry please," he replied. "As for lunch... let's head down this road and see if there's a café or something...."

They walked in relative silence for fifteen minutes, down the busy London street. Harry had forgotten just how loud it could be in the city, and he kept expecting something to happen, and when it didn't he had to remind himself that that was normal. Nevertheless, he felt as if they'd gotten away from whatever that was a few minutes ago too easily. He was still prepared for anything.

"How about this place on the corner?" said Sophia, pointing to a small sun-drenched building, a few floors high. The first floor was a pub, the others presumably rooms for rent. The building was painted black, with two words written over the windows; quite fittingly it was the name of the public house.

*Sherlock Holmes*

"It's named after the detective," Harry said. "I suppose it's as good as any place."

As they approached, Harry began to feel hot in the sun and wanted to sit down. It wasn't a very big place, but it was busy. Many people were passing by on the street, and Harry quickly grabbed one of the five green tables that were placed out the front. He'd prefer to sit outside, and Sophia didn't seem to mind as she sat down opposite him on the green metal chair. They put their bundled robes just under the table.

They had come, somewhat appropriately, to the birth place of many of the greatest stories in the world. This building, this pub, had once been known as the Northumberland Hotel, and it was here that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle wrote many of his famous Sherlock Holmes novels. The most famous being *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, and this actually saw Henry Baskerville visit Sherlock Holmes at this very pub.

"I'll head inside and get us something to eat," Sophia said. "They might not serve you here, under Muggle law you're under age."

Harry nodded. "Just get me anything," he said, passing her a bundle of banknotes. A hundred pounds. "Something simple, a steak sandwich if they've got it."

Sophia accepted the money and with another small smile, turned and walked over and into the pub. Harry relaxed in the warm sun as she was gone, folding his hands across his lap and watching the people of London pass him by. It was a fine neighbourhood, very clean and there was plenty of vegetation around the place. Large trees and small gardens adorned the street, running up and down vines covered the modern houses - all under a cloudless sky.

A few minutes past this way and Harry was watching a group of youths, teenagers about his age, across the street leaning against the brick wall of someone's garden - a garden that was mostly white roses, Harry didn't fail to notice this - holding skateboards and rebelliously passing a cigarette between themselves.

Briefly, Harry wondered if he could have *ever* lived a life as simple as that. Those teenagers probably attended a local secondary school, high school, and had taken the day off to just have fun, be kids, do what was expected of them. Harry couldn't even imagine fitting in that way, and he didn't try to. His life wasn't that, never would be. He dealt in death and war, and they did nothing more than skip school and smoke cigarettes.

Five minutes later and Harry saw Sophia come out of the pub, a young man holding the door open for her, carrying a tray with their lunch on it. She muttered thanks to the man, who smiled and nodded before heading into the pub himself. Quickly and alertly, Sophia placed the tray on the table and then sat down again opposite Harry.

On the tray were two thick sandwiches, a glass of sparkling champagne, and a pint of bitter lager. Harry looked from the tray to Sophia, raising his eyebrows in question.

"Beef and lettuce, I'm afraid," she said. "All out of steak. And I wasn't sure what you drink, so I just got you a lager."

Harry looked at the bubbling beer in the pint glass and then just shrugged. "I've never drank lager before," he said honestly, picking up the glass and plate and moving them in front of him.

Sophia looked surprised. "Never? Surely your father gave you a sip occasionally, all fathers do."

Harry took a bite of his sandwich. It wasn't half bad. "I never had a father until a month ago," he replied pragmatically. "A godfather... but that situation was difficult. Me and him couldn't exactly pop down to the pub, not with his legal status... though I wouldn't have put it past him to try," he finished with a small, sad smile.

"Is this a story from another world?" Sophia asked, pushing a strand of her long blonde hair back behind her ear.

"A long one, yes," answered Harry, and then he did take a sip of the lager. "But not the one you want or... need... to hear."

Sophia sighed, sipping her champagne. "How's the lager?"

Harry shook his head. "Its fine," he said indifferently, taking a bigger sip. "In fact I think I like it."

Sophia nodded and took a bite of her sandwich. London continued to pass them by and Harry glanced at every single face, looking for something or someone that didn't fit. He had definitely been out of the safety of Hogwarts too long - something should've happened, something always happens. Why hadn't it?

*You're being paranoid, he told himself. Not everyone is out to get you. Most are, but not everyone.*

"Are you going to tell me how you came to be in this world, Harry?" Sophia asked, bringing him out of his thoughts.

Harry was startled for a moment but he didn't show it. That was the first time Sophia had ever called him Harry. For some reason it didn't sound right coming from her. Harry finished the half of his sandwich in his hand and took a gulp of lager before answering. He brought his other hand to rest under his chin, leaning on the side of the chair, and

rubbed the rough stubble that he hadn't bothered to shave off that morning.

"It is a long story," he eventually said. "A lot of impossibilities within it. You might want to get another drink before I begin, you're gonna need it."

Sophia said nothing; she merely stared at him for a few minutes, before waving her hand for him to begin.

Harry took a deep breath, which he let out as a long sigh. "Alright..." he said. "Where to begin?"

Harry began, as most stories do, at the beginning. He spoke quietly at first, without much conviction. But after a time he fell into his story as he saw it all in his mind's eye. He spoke from when the Aurors had first been moved into a new headquarters building built on the road to Hogsmeade. From there he spoke about everything that had led up until the equinox.

He was half an hour into the story when he came to the large, huge, battle that had taken place on March the 20<sup>th</sup> in Hogsmeade. Some details he omitted, like the time he had spent searching the forest for Ginny, Ron, and Hermione, or how he had cast that powerful shield between the Death Eaters and the Aurors, falling down between the two clashing forces - and skipped ahead to his confrontation with Voldemort.

Forty five minutes had past by since he had begun to speak, and Sophia had not interrupted once. She sat enthralled by his tales of other worlds, and at times had to catch herself with her mouth hanging open in complete surprise and shock at something Harry had said. When he spoke of the magic that had created the doorway between worlds, she saw him struggling how it felt to know he had to sacrifice himself to it, but she understood perfectly. There were some things that just had to be done.

Harry pulled the collar of his shirt aside when he spoke of being impaled upon the sword of Gryffindor, and showed her the ropy scar and mangled mess his healed shoulder had become. It was still red and raw, but Harry had been rubbing in the cream his mother had

given him for the past two nights and that had stopped the circulation problems he'd been having, but it was still difficult to look at.

His tale drawing to a close, Harry highlighted the main events that had occurred within the Stream, on the Boundary of existence. He spoke of infinity, of eternity - and holding that in the palm of his hand. Sophia never doubted him once, not anymore, the truth could be seen in his eyes. All of this had happened, in at least one world this had happened.

Sophia had gotten so lost in her own thoughts, that she wasn't aware that Harry had finished speaking until he cleared his throat. She jumped slightly in spite of herself, and looked up at him with glazed and awe-filled eyes. "Did... this is *amazing!*" she managed.

"It is," Harry agreed. "Whenever I think about it... it always makes me feel so small. That there are millions, perhaps even billions, of other worlds out there, different realities... in which everything can be so similar, and at the same time vastly different."

Sophia was biting her thumb nail and then she sighed. "Did you... did you meet me in your other world?" she asked.

Harry shook his head. "I've never met you before. Last Sunday was the first time I'd ever heard your name."

Shaking her head slowly, she replied, "It certainly throws a lot into perspective. Makes me wonder 'why?'"

Harry smiled sadly. "I've thought of little else for the past month, and not gotten any further than that. I don't understand why or how it works; I just know that it does."

"And... do you intend to return to your original world?" she asked.

"If I do," Harry sighed, "it won't be for at least five months. Too many things to do here first. Got myself caught up in a war..."

Sophia smiled. "That you did... do you want another drink?"

Harry opened his mouth to speak, but it was then that he once again saw something wrong on the edge of his peripheral vision, he made no sign that he had noticed anything. "I think we should head back to Hogwarts," he said, in a tone suggesting that she not argue.

Sophia frowned. "Commander, what-" She paused, as a quick glance at the nearby roads and houses had shown her what Harry had seen. She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Harry... there's -"

"I know," he said quietly, almost regretfully. "I know..."

"How could they have followed us?" Sophia hissed, confusion and anger flashing across her cold face.

Harry shrugged. "Just pick up your robes and Apparate away, Sophia. I'll handle this..."

Sophia scowled. "I'm not a child, Commander. Please do not treat me as such."

"Grab your robes anyway, we're going to move on."

Sophia paused for a moment, but then nodded. She reached down under the table to grab her bundle of robes, and as she did they unrolled in her hand and something came clattering out of the pocket - something hard and black, that fell and came to rest a few feet away. Harry followed it and saw that it was glowing, pulsating, slightly.

"What is that?" he asked.

Sophia gasped. "It's a... magical tracking device. I-"

Harry put it together instantly, as he recalled the man in the Ministry atrium that had 'accidentally' walked into Sophia. *Clever bastard*, he thought.

"We have to go, now, there are too many people he -" Harry began, but then the worst happened.

Feeling it before he saw it, Harry stood up in a flash and kicked the green garden table aside with a cry, and grabbed Sophia around the



waist, throwing her to the floor and kneeling down himself. With a thought, Harry raised his right hand and conjured a physical object shield charm.

Not a second too early either, as it was then that two dozen magical silver arrows, writhed in green flame, impacted against the shining blue spherical wall - that was Harry and Sophia's protection against death.

The arrows hit the shield with enough speed to take Harry's head clean off, but the charm protected them. Unfortunately it protected only them, and as each arrow hit the shield it was deflected with the same velocity at which it had been fired, and sought a new target within its path.

*Shock was always first... and then came the screams.*

Glass and metal shattered and trees went up in flame as over five dozen arrows were unleashed upon the unsuspecting Muggle street - deflected every which way by Harry's shield.

Moving and parked cars had their tyres slashed and one green van was actually flipped over from the resounding force of seven impacting arrows on its left side. The driver was impaled against his seat as his van came crashing down on the sidewalk where those teenagers Harry had watched had sat an hour ago. It crushed the garden with the white roses, and burst into flame.

Thirteen people were shot clean through by the deflected arrows, which lost none of their speed as they entered... and exited these unsuspecting victims. The arrows shot out in every direction, most eventually coming to a quivering stop in the brick walls of the terraced houses across the street.

All of this happened in less than ten seconds, and in that time this quiet London street had become a death trap. All the sound that reached Harry's ears now were the screams and alarms, people running in fear, falling. The smell of magically induced smoke reached his nostrils as he got to his feet, eyes flashing dangerously. Those responsible were about to die.

"Stay down," he growled to Sophia, and wisely she obeyed.

Over the coming months, the bounty hunter, or hunters, would learn that if you didn't kill Harry initially, catch him by surprise, then you were as good as dead. The men that had attacked Harry now though, were lining up for a second shot - when they should have been running.

Harry screamed in fury at the sight of the slaughtered men, women, and children lying in the street around him. Most in flames, blood already drying, clinging to the once clean paved sidewalk. Without blinking once, Harry saw his enemy.

Seven men in all, three standing in the middle of the road - visible to all. Two were to the right and left of Harry, wands pointed in his direction and curses already on their lips. The final two men, robed in black, were situated in the most tactical place. They stood upon the high roof of the building directly across the street from the *Sherlock Holmes*, which had been spared getting punctured by any arrows.

*A group of hunters, Harry thought. Well Art told me to expect this... why am I not surprised?*

"AVADA-"

Harry didn't hesitate, didn't waste a second. The two men, one twenty feet to his left, the other twenty feet to his right. *Again, strategically placed. These blokes knew what they were doing.* They were the closest, able to do the most damage; Harry raised his arms, pointing the tips of his fingers towards them just as they spoke the Killing Curse.

With no remorse, he summoned both of the men with a thought. Muggles were running around him in fear, one woman actually ran into him but she was knocked to the ground and Harry didn't even stumble. With two of the hunters connected to him through summoning charms, Harry brought his hands together and, screaming in surprise and realisation, both men flew through the air like an... arrow... and their heads collided in front of Harry with a sickening crunch.

*Dead instantly... perhaps too merciful for their crimes. To the true bounty hunters, nothing but the target matters. These men cared not for the lives they had ended and ruined today.*

They dropped as Harry moved on, now glaring at the three men in the middle of the street. A bone breaking hex impacted against his shield charm, which he had conjured with a thought, and dissipated outwards in a fountain of red sparks. Two more curses were covering the short distance through the air towards him. Harry recognised them as Vestic curses. He didn't bother to move - his shield took them both.

"*EXPELLIARMUS!*" Harry roared, his palm bursting with magic. The shockwave from this curse was so powerful that it threw the intended target from his feet and back through the window of a car behind him. His spine snapped and blackness claimed him.

The two men on the rooftops had, by now, taken to their brooms. It was how they had gotten up there, and thoughts of only killing Harry were in their minds now. Seven million galleons was the reward if they succeeded.

Harry wasn't about to make it easy though, and his determination and resolve to survive was a lot deeper than that of those trying to kill him. It had to be.

"*AVADA KEDAVRA!*" the two men standing furiously in the street bellowed in unison.

Harry reacted fast, and knowing his shield charm was useless against those curses, he threw himself quickly in front of a nearby parked car, that was in flames from several of the flaming arrows that were imbedded in it. Not half a second later and the first green curse surged over the bonnet of the car and tickled Harry's hair as he ducked down. This curse continued on for a few feet before striking a red mailbox, which promptly exploded in green flames.

The second curse struck the car just on the right front-side wheel. This tore away a good portion of the front of the car, and threw the other half towards Harry. Having been leaning against the left wheel,

Harry was thrown forward harshly and he hit his chin on the hard curb, as it began to rain flaming letters.

Shaking his head and tasting blood, Harry rolled to his left, climbing over a body, and got to his feet, although he was still kneeling behind the battered and broken automobile. Thick smoke rose from it now and this provided some cover as Harry ran forward, palms blazing.

Using both of his palms, he cast the levitation charm on the ruined and enflamed car. With a cry it rose several feet into the air, just as two figures soared overhead on brooms, one taking a swing at Harry's head with a blade. Sweating and with blood dripping down his neck from his split chin, Harry eyed up the two men responsible for those Killing Curses.

"ARGH!" he cried, and with a great effort threw the flaming, mangled and *heavy* car, towards them. It moved fast, and they didn't get out of the way in time.

*CRASH!*

Sparks were ignited along the road as the car slid along for a few feet before crashing into another stationary vehicle, leaving a bloody trail in its wake.

Many of the patrons inside the *Sherlock Holmes* had come outside by this point, and now were running for their lives around Harry as they took in the destruction - many of them witnessing the only dead body they had ever seen.

Harry turned fast on his heel after throwing the car, not needing to see the impact, he knew he'd just killed two more men and the first thing he saw was Sophia with her wand raised upwards, a curse on her lips.

He heard it over the flames and screams. "*REDUCTO!*"

Harry followed the path of the curse, and was pleased to see that one of the men on the brooms was going to be hit. The man saw this as well, and his dark eyes widened as he realised what was about to happen. Whether it was skill or luck he pulled up on his broom at that

point, and the blasting curse impacted against the handle, tearing it to shreds.

The man was thrown backwards off the broom and fell screaming to the ground thirty feet below. He hit the windshield and tumbled onto the bonnet of a moving car. The driver of the car ground to halt as this happened, and the man was thrown hard onto the road, spinning a few times before coming to a stop near a few of the flaming arrows that were stuck in the road. He didn't get back up.

"HARRY!" cried Sophia.

Having watched the demise of that previous man, Harry had lost sight of the final man, flying somewhere above. He turned to Sophia as she screamed and saw that she was looking over his shoulder. Instinct saved Harry's life again at this point, and he fell over his own feet, just as the swish of a blade cut passed his left ear.

Harry coughed as he hit the bloody ground, and winced as one of the running Muggles stepped on his hand. There were few runners now, but Harry saw enough to know that he could get trampled if he didn't get up, as most were watching the figure flying above them with amazed and frightened looks upon their faces, as they were running passed him.

The large man on the broom spun in the air, and his hate filled and cold eyes connected with Harry's as he raised his wand, having just sheathed his blade, and pointed it towards him and the rushing crowd. Harry gasped, someone was about to die, but who would it be...?

"*AMOS CRIOS NEX!*" the man upon his broom bellowed, just as Sophia lined up a shot against him.

Harry swore as three arrows alight with green flame shot out of his wand, heading down into the crowd fast. Moving as a blur, Harry jumped to his feet and grabbed the nearest person to him, pulling her into his chest and placing his back towards the arrows.

The Muggle woman, who had brown hair and was wearing a female business suit, screamed as Harry grabbed her and struggled in his grasp. Harry was strong though, she was going nowhere. Two of the

three arrows impacted into the stone pavement either side of Harry, missing him and the woman by inches. The third arrow, however, flew true, and Harry cried out in pain and surprise as it pierced the back of his right leg, just above his knee.

Having just saved the woman's life, she thanked him by screaming and elbowing him in the stomach. Harry coughed and fell to the ground, and the woman made a run for it. *You're welcome...* Harry thought, but he knew she couldn't have known what was happening.

Back on the ground, an arrow stuck in his leg, the tip protruding just above his knee and blood already soaking his jeans, Harry saw a beam of light connect with the broom of the man still flying above the disaster area, and then he saw his broom slide out from underneath him.

Sophia had cast a summoning charm, and as Harry struggled to stand on his good leg, still coughing from the blow to his stomach, she caught the broom as the bounty hunter plummeted to the ground. Green flames licked at Harry's jeans, another effect of the arrow, and he doused them quickly with a water charm from his left palm.

The final bounty hunter hit the ground close to Harry, rolling and grunting twice before coming to a stop. This man was tough though, and he hadn't fallen that far. He began to pull himself to his feet, fumbling with the handle of his blade in its sheath.

Harry managed to raise himself to one knee, just like the hunter, who had connected eyes once again with Harry and both of them exchanged untamed fury. The large man, with a muscular upper body and an angular face, behind which two brown eyes glared, pulled his short sabre out of its sheath and then with a cry of madness took a swing at Harry.

Harry was breathing heavily and biting his bottom lip against the pain in his leg, but he still had his wits about him. He saw this final attack as the last stroke of a desperate man. The sabre blade was glinting with the reflection of the flames from a dozen nearby sources, and just as it fell towards Harry he heard a series of Apparation pops and sirens in the distance.

That was just on the edge of his mind though, and raising his strong right arm Harry called for, he summoned, the sword of Gryffindor. Magical light created a rough outline of the blade in the air and then Harry felt cool metal in his palm, which he nearly jarred defending against the merciless blow of the bounty hunter.

Metal struck metal and a series of blue and gold sparks erupted from the joined blades. Harry's was the older and far more powerful though, and the hunter's sword was notched at the hilt, he would have to compensate in his next swing. There wouldn't be a next swing though.

Using the momentary surprise the appearance of his sword had caused, Harry brought it down and under the other man's blade, and swung it viciously towards his right knee. *An act of vengeance maybe, for the arrow.* The infinitely razor sharp edge of Harry's sword cut through the flesh and bone of the man's knee as if it were butter.

He had been kneeling on that leg, just as Harry was, and now all strength left it and it crumpled beneath him, just as the first stabs of pain reached his mind. He screamed, his sabre - destined for Harry's neck - fell to the ground harmlessly, its owner falling next, clawing at his almost severed leg.

Sophia rushed over, throwing away the summoned broom, and grasped Harry beneath his right arm as he put away the sword with a thought. "Ow..." he managed as she pulled him to his feet, and he leant against her as he would a crutch, keeping his right leg limp at his side. The arrow in there was now burning his flesh, and the pain was immense.

Harry was no stranger to pain though, and he gritted his teeth, glaring at the man who had caused so much more needless death this day. His palm responded to the anger Harry felt, and glowed for all to see with magic.

What happened next, was a credit to the merciful side that Harry had nearly buried. He saw the destruction around him, caused in part by this man - who was now at his mercy. Harry spat out some blood, and still leaning against Sophia, raised his left palm and cried,

*"Stupefy!"*

The man was unconscious instantly; the blood stained pavement around him was soon soaked with his own blood. But he would live... he didn't deserve to, but he would.

"You should have killed him," Sophia said emotionlessly, glancing at the nearby bodies of the innocent.

*Once again, the innocent suffer for everyone else's ambition.*

Harry blinked back the pain, he was numb to the worst of it now - but he supposed it was good that such an atrocity could still affect him. It meant he was still human. "My body count is already too high," he replied to Sophia.

Remembering those pops he had heard earlier, Harry looked to his left and right, and saw quite a few Aurors running up and down the street, passed dead or dying Muggles, around destroyed vehicles and untamed destruction. People were cowering or crawling away, Harry wanted to leave - but he had to explain what had happened.

"Help me over there..." he managed, holding Sophia's forearm strongly.

"We should get you to a healer."

Harry nodded. "I just have to speak to them first, and then we can head back to Hogwarts."

\*\*\*\*

"This doesn't look too bad," Madam Pomfrey said, applying some cream and muttering a small spell to Harry's pierced leg.

"Hurts like it should," Harry said through gritted teeth. The pain wasn't that bad anymore though, the worst part had been removing the arrow. *That* had hurt.

Bandages shot out of Madam Pomfrey's wand and wrapped themselves around Harry's healing leg tightly. "There we go, dear. You should be able to walk on it now, but don't overdo it."



"Thanks," Harry said, and after performing a quick cleaning charm on his jeans, he pulled them up and over his boxers. "I don't suppose I could get some dreamless sleep potion while I'm here, could I?"

"Too much of that can be unhealthy," Madam Pomfrey warned, but the dark and haunted rings underneath Harry's eyes won her over. "Just a minute..."

"How are you feeling, Harry?" Lily, his mother, said as Madam Pomfrey ambled over to her office.

Harry turned slowly and met Lily's eyes. She was standing behind the bed he was sitting on, holding an armful of empty potion vials. "I'm alright," he said. "Don't think I'm going to leave Hogwarts again anytime soon. Too many bad guys out there."

"Did you want to come to dinner tonight?" she then asked. "Michael and Melissa have been asking after you, and James wants to discuss this Quidditch thing at the end of the month... or do you have to be somewhere else...?"

Harry smiled sadly, and his eyes flickered with choice. "I'll be there. What time?"

Lily smiled now. "In about five hours, at seven."

"Here we are, Mr. Potter. I'll give you two vials, which should be enough for four nights. But after that you'll have to lay off it for a few weeks. You were given it everyday whilst in St. Mungo's the other week and Lily tells me you've been taking it since then."

Harry nodded and accepted the vials gratefully. "Thank you," he said honestly. "I'll - I'll see you later," he finished, speaking to Lily.

Twenty minutes later and Harry limped into the Room of Requirement. It had taken several stops along the way as his leg was killing him, but he had made it. He found it set out with the circular table in the centre, dim torches on the walls and, for a change, a large window that sunlight streamed in through, highlighting the faces of the other seven people in the room.

"Commander, how is your leg?" asked Sophia, she had just informed them on what had happened in London, and they were now devising ways to detect magical tracking devices so this situation couldn't be repeated.

"Stings a bit but that's nothing new. Madam Pomfrey said it should be fine in a few hours," Harry said, limping around to his seat between Dermas and Sirius. "Did you lot get Diagon Alley done?"

"We did," nodded Sirius, and as he sat down Dermas slid a small pocketsize trunk across the smooth polished oak of the table. Harry caught it and picked it up, raising his eyebrows in question. "Completely outfitted, courtesy of the Ministry."

Harry nodded. "Good. I'll have a look at it later... I assume you all know what happened to Sophia and I today?" he then asked.

They all nodded. "From the description I believe it may have been the mercenary force, BD-1," Art Nuan said. "Ruthless men... although not anymore."

"BD?" Harry asked.

"Black Dragon. They are from Romania."

Harry shrugged. "Well the Minister has agreed to let Dumbledore place some more wards upon the Ministry. I'll have to speak to him about that...."

"You're still certain it will be attacked?"

Harry nodded. "I'm actually more certain now that if it was it would completely destroyed. Three bounty hunters, at least, were strolling through the atrium this morning. Three bounty hunters that went on to kill more than two dozen people an hour or so later. No security measures stopped them from entering."

"No security measures could!" Tonks protested.

Harry didn't want an argument. "It doesn't matter... it happened, we have to fix it if we're going to win this war. I don't suppose we've heard anything about that riddle yet, have we?" he asked hopefully.

Thomas Fright sighed. "As a riddle it makes little to no sense. Although I did see that if you take the first letter of the first four lines you can make the word, *GLEN*, but I'm not even sure if that was significant."

"Did you inform the blokes working on it in the ministry about this?" Harry asked.

Fright nodded. "I went an hour or so ago. They'd already seen that," he said.

"Well that's it then," Harry said. "We wait now. Keep our ears to the ground, be ready for an attack. We'll have our next meeting in two days, or, if something happens before then..."

*(Pray to whoever or whatever is listening that it won't)*

"I'll call a meeting."

\*\*\*\*

"So, Harry," smiled James, passing a bowl of green and red lettuce to his left around the large rectangular family table. "I hear it's been a busy couple of weeks for you since Azkaban. We've hardly seen you."

Harry took a sip of the wine from the flute he had been given fifteen minutes ago and shrugged in an indifferent manner. "It's been interesting, if nothing else. I'm sorry I've not had much time for you, for any of you," he said, glancing apologetically at Lily, Michael, James, and Melissa.

"Don't worry about it, Harry," Michael said, slurping up a long shoestring piece of spaghetti. "I've been quite happy basking in your reflected glory."

James snorted laughter and Lily glared warningly at Michael. Harry merely smiled kindly though. "Heard you got a week of detention with Snape," he said.

Michael shuddered. "He was only annoyed because I took out three of Slytherin's best duellers..."

"With one curse," James said proudly. "Couldn't have done better myself."

"James..." cautioned Lily, smiling warningly. Harry thought he heard James swallow nervously.

"Was it true what we heard about the Chamber of Secrets, Harry?" Melissa unexpectedly asked quietly.

Harry chewed and swallowed his piece of steak with deliberate slowness, and then looked over the table to meet Melissa's eyes. "What did you hear?"

"That you went down there and killed Voldemort's basilisk!" Michael interjected, and thrust his knife forward like one would a sword.

Harry smiled harshly, and laughed slightly, but it sounded like a tired cough. "I forgot how hard it is to keep a secret in this castle... although I did only tell Dumbledore..." Harry fell into silent thought.

"Let's talk about something else," Lily said after the silence had stretched on awkwardly. "James, didn't you want to talk about that Quidditch in a few days."

"You know I did," James said through a mouthful of pasta. "Harry, still up to be our Seeker?"

"What day was it?" Harry asked, unconsciously rubbing his curse scar.

"End of the month. Wednesday, April 30<sup>th</sup>. Dumbledore's cancelled lessons that afternoon."

Harry nodded. "I'll do it. Haven't played any Quidditch since late last year though."

"You'll be fine," Melissa said, and then she offered Harry a kind smile. Harry blinked and returned it as best he could.

"That's right," James agreed. "Michael and I will be Chasers. Sirius is one of our Beaters, although grudgingly as we're playing the Gryffindor team... you know anyone for the spare Chaser and Beater spots, Harry, or, Michael?"

Harry shrugged. "How about Dermas Trask. He told me he used to be a Beater."

"I think that man has been a bit of everything at one point," Lily said, sighing. "He was living as a Muggle for the past twenty or so years though. He may not have been on the Quidditch pitch for awhile."

"Living as a Muggle!" Melissa exclaimed. "Why?"

Harry stroked his chin absently, feeling the rough scab that had developed there after the scrape that afternoon. "His fiancé was killed by Voldemort during the First War," he said without much thought.

James sighed. She had been a member of the Order and his and Lily's friends. Dorcas Meadows, one of the early victims just as Voldemort was gaining true power. "We never had a break in the war, Harry," he said quietly. "There was no first war, there was only this one."

Harry nodded and placed his fork down next to his still full plate. "Of course..." he said. "I'm sorry. Sometimes everything just gets a bit blurry and I'm not sure where I am...."

"I guess you'd forget a lot of things having the memories of two worlds in your head..." Michael said, with a hiccup.

Harry smiled again. "Don't worry. You're a new memory, I'll have no trouble forgetting that. Actually-"

"Harry!" Lily gasped, and her fork clattered into her plate.

Harry was up in a flash, knocking his chair back as he did, wand in hand and the gleam of a fight in his eyes. "What...?"

James stood up now and picked up the chair behind Harry. "Sit down," he said. "You're bleeding..."

Harry frowned. "Bleeding? Where-" Harry wasn't left wondering what all the fuss was about for long. Slowly a small trickle of blood fell down his forehead and into the groove between his eye and nose. It was his scar. "Ah damn..."

"Here," Melissa said, and tossed him a napkin.

"Thanks," Harry said, and pressed the white tissue paper against his forehead.

"Did something just happen...?" James asked.

Harry shrugged. "This is normal actually. It bleeds every now and again... usually because Voldemort's up to something... but this is different, there was no pain...."

Harry suddenly frowned and pulled the napkin away from his forehead. He expected it to twinge slightly as the blood would have stuck it to his scar, but it came away easily enough. When he saw the tissue he gasped.

"What is it?" Lily asked, as James sat back down.

Harry coughed. "Nothing...." he managed, and screwed the napkin up, levitating it over to the bin - committing what he saw to memory, and memory alone.

*And what did I see? He asked himself. What the hell is going on?*

Doubt and uncertainty once again took up residence in Harry's troubled mind, as he re-read the words that had been written in his own blood upon that napkin.

*Guardian... Boundary... Broken... End*

Four words, four words that had *bled* out of him, desperate to be seen perhaps....

"You say it's normal for that to happen!?" asked Michael.

"Michael..." warned Lily.

"I'm not sure anymore..." Harry managed distractedly. "But then I'm not sure of anything anymore."

*End... why does that sound ominous?*

Harry couldn't help but feel that someone (*something*) was trying to send him a message.

*Guardian.*

The next question was, of course, why...?

*Boundary Broken... what have I done...?*

"Hey listen, Harry," Melissa said, and Harry jumped as he was startled out of his thoughts.

"Em... yes?" he coughed, clearing his throat.

"There's a -er- small gathering tonight," she began, glancing sideways at Lily. "For one of the sixth year Gryffindors, Parvati Patil, it's her birthday. She asked me to invite you...."

Harry coughed and drained his glass in one quick swig, dabbing his forehead occasionally. "Why? I hardly know her here."

"Well you are a Gryffindor," James said. "And have made quite a name for yourself this past month."

Melissa nodded. "Most of the sixth years asked me to invite you, Harry," she said. "They seemed a bit put out that you don't attend class anymore."

"I'm not sure if it's my thing...." Harry whispered, not really feeling in the mood.

"It might do you good to mingle with some kids your own age, Harry," Lily offered. "And that is my professional medical opinion."

"You can't argue with that," Michael joked. "Believe me, I've tried."

James snorted laughter again and Lily scowled at him. "What?" he asked innocently. "It's Sirius he gets it from. I know better than to cross you, dear."

Lily smiled sweetly at him and then turned back to Harry. "You never know... you might have some fun for a change..."

Harry blinked, and stared at the rainbow of colours that flashed when the flickering light hit his wine glass just right. "Okay... I'll- I'll be there. What time?"

Melissa smiled and looked slightly relieved. "Fun starts at nine."

Glancing at the clock on the wall, Harry said, "Is the password to the common room still, *Avescus*?"

"It is."

"Then I best go get a shower. Thanks... thank you for dinner."

\*\*\*\*

9:15pm

Rubbing his clean shaven face, Harry thought that the scab under his chin must look like one hell of a shaving cut. He ascended the final set of stairs up Gryffindor Tower and came out along the corridor for the common room. A knot of nervousness had settled in his stomach as he approached, and Harry sighed at that.

*Why can I kill a man and hardly feel a thing? And yet get nervous at the prospect of seeing friends...*

*But they're not your friends, not really,* the little voice in his head told him. *Your friends are all at once right next to you, and thousands of*



*miles along the Stream away. You couldn't be further from your friends if you tried.*

Tucked under his left arm was the gift he had quickly Apparated into London to buy, using some of the Muggle pounds he had withdrawn earlier that day. Harry knew the dangers that leaving Hogwarts could bring about, but there was no way for anyone to know that he had been gone for fifteen minutes to a Muggle late-night store.

Harry sighed and rubbed his forehead, checking for blood. He hadn't felt it last time so he had to assume that it could have happened again. Soon enough the portrait of the Fat Lady loomed up before him, still standing regally as she had done for years.

Taking a deep breath, Harry whispered, "*Avescus...*"

As the portrait swung open to reveal the familiar hole into the well-used Gryffindor common room, the first one of Harry's senses to react was sound, his ears, as loud music reached him - previously muffled by the portrait and, Harry guessed, a silencing charm. He walked in slowly, hands in his jeans pockets.

He had made some effort to dress up nicely, and had even shaved. Harry was wearing a black short sleeved shirt, transfigured from one of the few pairs of robes he owned. His wand holster was visible strapped around his right wrist and up his forearm, but it would be a cold day in hell before Harry took that off.

He had made a valiant attempt at flattening his hair in the mirror of the showers he had asked for in the Room of Requirement, but that was definitely one battle he could never win. Surprisingly, Harry had discovered three or four strands of dusty grey hair standing out defiantly amongst the tangled black mess. This had shocked him at first but he supposed it was only a matter of time. He'd pulled them out, but once they were there they were there for life.

As he exited the small tunnel that led from the portrait, Harry was momentarily taken back by the number of people in the common room. There weren't just Gryffindors in here, and it wasn't a small gathering as Melissa had told him - although Harry realised now that had been for her mother's (*his mother...? No...*) benefit.

No one seemed to notice him as he entered, and that suited Harry just fine. Better not to stand out for once. As he walked, for lack of anything more to do, towards the armchairs by the fire, Harry had to push through thick crowds of people. Most were talking, some were dancing, as small balls of light glowed in the air - decorations. Harry recognised many, but he knew no one would know him. Not how they should.

There was a group of Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs standing around one of the tables, talking happily and excitedly. He saw Ernie Macmillan, Michael Corner, Susan Bones, Cho Chang and Marietta Edgecombe. They were all wearing fine robes and it suddenly occurred to Harry that he was the only one in Muggle dress. The fact didn't bother him much.

"Harry?" someone said above the loud music and babble of excited voices. Harry turned towards the voice, adjusting his glasses as he did. "HARRY POTTER!"

He found the source. It was Parvati, the birthday girl. She sat in the armchairs near the fire, where Harry had been heading, surrounded by a gaggle of friends who followed her gaze to meet Harry's. Harry smiled as best he could and walked over, noting the nervousness on some of their faces. Parvati stood up as he approached.

"We weren't sure if you'd make it," she said, tossing her long hair back behind her shoulders.

"Here I am," Harry said. "I got you this... I wasn't sure what to get you. It's a... er... Muggle chocolate."

Harry, somewhat lamely, presented Parvati with the kilogram block of Cadbury chocolate he had picked up half an hour ago. He'd attached a small red bow and now that he thought about it, it was a pretty poor effort for a gift. Parvati seemed to love it though, and kissed him quickly on the cheek as she accepted it.

"We've missed you in class," she began talking fast, grabbing his hand and pulling him over reluctantly towards her group of friends by and in the armchairs. "We know that you've had some important things to do but you didn't even stop by to say 'hi' occasionally."

Harry shrugged. "Sorry," he said.

"Hey, Harry," Ron Weasley said from the elongated armchair nearest the roaring fire. He was sitting tightly next to Hermione, who was smiling at Harry with her arm around Ron's neck. "Good to see you again, mate."

"You to," agreed Harry, and realised that it did feel good to see his two best friends again, as Parvati pulled him down into the armchair next to her - nearly sitting on his lap.

*They're not your friends though,* the voice in his head reminded him.

*They could be,* Harry told himself. *They could be friends - same people, new friendships.*

*Don't get too attached,* the little voice said, almost mockingly. *You'll either get them killed or leave this world...*

Harry didn't have a response for that one.

"Here you go, Harry," Parvati said, and handed him a paper cup filled with a brown liquid.

Dean Thomas was seated next to Harry and he told him that it was a Muggle drink, whiskey and cola. "Got a Muggle friend to send it out," he laughed, swirling a cup of his own. "Big hit with all those who don't know much about Muggles. You ever drink Beam before, Harry?"

"Can't say that I have," Harry replied, and took a sip of the fizzy, yet satisfying, drink. "Well I don't hate it."

Dean smiled and downed the rest of his quickly. "An acquired taste for some," he said, slapped Harry on the shoulder and stood up, heading over to the drinks table.

Harry watched him go with a frown... he and the Dean of his own world were identical. Another similarity to another world. There wasn't a difference between them. Harry shook his head, reminding himself where he was.

Quite a crowd had gathered around the armchairs now that Harry arrived, and the chatting and music were just getting louder. Harry, as was his way, scanned the crowd for danger and met many familiar faces who only knew him from his exploits.

"How've you been keeping, Harry?" Ron asked, calling above the music and leaning forward in his chair. "Heard about that Azkaban mess, you alright?"

Harry nodded. "Fine," he said, and swallowed the rest of his drink. "Looking forward to playing some Quidditch at the end of the month."

Ron smiled. "You gonna be the seeker against us?" he asked.

Harry nodded again, accepting another drink from Parvati - who seemed to have the ability to conjure them out of the air. Either that or she was just very fast.

"Well we'll have to see how it turns out," Ron shrugged indifferently. "I, for one," he smiled. "Don't like your chances - even though you've got our head of house on your side."

Harry offered him a small smile. "We'll have to see," he repeated.

For the next hour or so Harry greeted old friends who didn't know him, but wanted to - answered a few questions about the war - and drank a few more drinks. Eventually he began to feel the warm fuzzy feeling that was alcohol inside his head, and found himself actually enjoying the time he was spending at this party.

There were close to a hundred or so people in the room, and whilst the prefects were making sure no one under their fifth year got anything to drink except pumpkin juice, everyone seemed to be having a good time. Harry spotted Ginny once or twice in the crowd, but never approached her. No reason to.

Harry held conflicting feelings when it came to Ginny Weasley - *his* Ginny. He cared for her, more for her than anyone else anywhere across any world, but at the same time he knew she was near the top of Voldemort's '*To Kill*' list because of that. It was a hell of a price to

pay for being close to him. He hoped she was well protected back in his world.

"Well I have to say you're doing a smashing job," Neville Longbottom said loudly, parking himself down on the chair next to Harry. "You've got You-Know-Who on the run."

"Voldemort," Harry corrected him absently, thinking now how different this Neville was to the one he knew. Confident, taller - an opposite of his friend. "He's not gone yet though."

"He will be," Neville smiled. "You would have had him a few weeks ago if it hadn't been for that Portkey. It's all but done now."

"You think so?" Harry asked, shrugging. Somehow he felt that there were bigger problems happening somewhere, happening everywhere, than this weak version of Voldemort. He couldn't be the only one who noticed it, thinking of the strange dark haze that continued to fall before his eyes every now and again.

"I do," Neville continued. "You finish him off soon and then come back and do your NEWTs," he laughed. "Let me get you another drink."

The night wore on, and soon Harry began to talk more as the alcohol took its effect and loosened his tongue. He couldn't remember some of the things he was saying, and often frowned at the surprised and sometimes frightened expressions he saw on people's faces.

When the clock on the wall struck midnight, Harry accepted another Jim Beam and coke - his eighth, perhaps - and went and sat back down near his unfamiliar friends. He had just been chatting with a couple of Ravenclaws who had been in the DA, and had confused them all by mentioning this, and now as he sat he struck up a conversation with Hermione, appropriately enough, about the limits of magic.

"Well I did do my ancient runes assignment on how far magic can, and does, control our lives," Hermione said. "Why do you ask?"

Harry shrugged. "Not sure. Something someone said about how powerful I could be. I never asked you to find out about it last time I saw you, and I won't see that you again for awhile, so I'm hoping you knew something about it."

Hermione smiled, moving over and sitting down next to him. Ron had moved on somewhere else by this point. "I think you may be through with these," she said, effortlessly removing his drink from between his fingers. Harry didn't attempt to stop her. "You're not making much sense."

"Not much I do does," Harry laughed, holding his stomach. He felt a bit sick. "What were we talking about?"

"Nothing important," she replied gently, sipping his drink. "White roses and the moon."

Suddenly Harry became rigid in his seat, his eyes connecting sharply with Hermione's. "What... what does that mean?" he asked, wishing the room wasn't spinning as much as it was, and that the music wasn't so loud.

Hermione frowned. "What?" she asked. "White roses and the moon?" Harry nodded. "It's just an old saying. I always rather liked it. Why, what's the matter?"

Harry stared at her for a moment longer and then laughed hollowly. "I don't know!" he cried, turning a few heads. "Something is, something's gone wrong somewhere - but only I know about it, you see."

Hermione smiled and laughed as Harry did. "No I don't," she said shaking her head. "You sound a bit paranoid to me."

Harry smiled drunkenly again, forgetting the abstract mention of white roses. "Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they aren't after you."

"True enough," Hermione conceded. "So... what makes you think something is wrong?" she asked slowly. "And what is it?"

Harry sighed, and tenderly rubbed his chin, trying not to disturb the scab there. "I don't know what's wrong," he said. "But white roses have something to do with it."

Hermione blinked. "Perhaps you should head up to bed," she whispered. "You sound tired."

"I am," Harry agreed. "But I don't get much rest asleep."

The party began to wind down over the next hour or so, as the Gryffindors began to filter off up to bed, or fall asleep where they sat along with members of other houses. Other members of these houses were leaving in pairs - to sneak back to their common rooms without getting caught.

Eventually, only a handful of people were left awake in the Gryffindor common room, which was a mess. Harry sat observing the room from his seat by the fire, and vaguely remembered what he saw. He saw Hermione and Ron dancing alone in the middle of the paper strewn floor of the common room, their arms around one another, both whispering in each others ears. Parvati was hugging her sister by the portrait hole and thanking people for coming one by one. His eyes scanned the rest of the room and he caught sight of Dean and Seamus draining the rest of a glass bottle of amber liquid.

Harry's eyes then fell to the wand holster around his right wrist and his thoughts turned to the dull pain in his leg, which hadn't yet completely healed from the arrow earlier that day. After a moment or two, he realised how heavy his eyes felt and, leaning back in the comfortable armchair, he closed them and fell asleep soon after.

*There was a stone - in a forest of light beneath a hill of water.*

*Harry frowned and found himself approaching the stone, or more over, the boulder. His eyes adjusted to the brilliant light and he saw that there was a sword embedded in the boulder, protruding cleanly from within a set groove carved into the stone.*

*Vines grew from the gap in the stone where the sword was held, thorny vines. These were stretched down and into the ground - and*

*as Harry watched, dozens of long, elegant and tall white roses began to grow from within the grassy soil of the earth.*

*Then the fire came, and Harry could feel the heat of the flames and hear, yes hear, the... screams as the roses were engulfed and died.*

*Finally, a sense of a vast distance so great that it was incomprehensible washed over Harry, and he fell to his knees on the burning forest floor.*

*Only it wasn't a forest, it was a desert.*

*Sand stretched for miles in every direction - as far as the eye could see - and a sense of something almost foreign to him now fell upon Harry.*

*He realised he was afraid, but of what. Something behind him, he realised instantly, and turned with dread in his heart and mind to look upon a face that was... human.*

*"Hello, Harry," the figure said, swirling in and out of focus in the heat. His eyes were dark and he had a grin upon his face that seemed to stretch for miles. "Lost are we?"*

*Harry fell back onto the hot sand, his eyes wide and fearful. The stranger, a man that could have been anyone, continued to smile and put a hand on his hip, using the other to push his brown hair out of his face. "God help me..." Harry whispered, and the stranger burst out laughing.*

*"God?" the stranger cried. "God pisses on your world, Harry. Here, have a rose."*

*The man clicked his long, thin fingers and a rose of extreme, but dark beauty appeared in his hand. It wasn't a white rose though; its petals were as dark as the night. Harry feared it as well, wondering briefly what he had to fear anymore.*

*"I don't want it..." he managed, averting his eyes.*



*"You don't want it?" the demon, for he could be nothing else, whispered. "But it's yours, Harry, you created it!"*

*Harry shook his head, digging his hands into the hot sand. "No..."*

*"Yes, yes, yes," laughed the insane, grinning demon, and reached down for Harry's right hand buried in the desert sand - holding the evil black rose with his left. "It's not for you to decide anymore. Death will be a relief soon enough, my promise that everything will soon End."*

*Harry gasped at the emphasis and finality that the final word possessed. It sounded so cold. He tried to struggle as the cold, burning fingers of the demon clamped down upon his right arm and pulled it effortlessly up.*

*"Roses were red... violets are blue... enjoy it while it lasts, Harry... because there's not much left for you," the Demon sang, and it burnt Harry's ears as the thorny black rose was shoved into his palm.*

*Harry felt no pain, but he saw the blood as the sharp thorns of the rose stem cut his hand and fingers in a dozen places, and the grinning demon closed his fingers around the deadly flower. It flowed freely down his arm and everything seemed to be getting brighter and*

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Harry awoke in the same chair he had fallen asleep in, sitting in the Gryffindor common room. It was early morning and he was drenched in a cold sweat. His eyes were wild and he stifled a moan of fear and confusion.

*A dream... he told himself, just a normal dr-*

Looking down at himself Harry gasped. Red drops of fresh blood flowed warmly from his right hand - which was cut in at least a dozen different places.

Inside his head, and perhaps only inside his head, Harry heard that demon laughing, and saw his dark grin in the crackling flames of the common room fire. *Everything will soon end...*

Harry shuddered and bled.

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## Chapter 16 - Power of Existence

*Deep inside of a parallel universe  
It's getting harder and harder*

*To tell what came first*

*~~RHCP*

*April 27<sup>th</sup>*

"Commander... Harry James Potter," a rough female voice croaked from within the Minister of Magic's office.

Mid-afternoon and the Ministry was buzzing with day-to-day activity. Owls and flying paper messages winged their way through and around the complex, workers worked, and a select few sat outside the office of the Minister.

Looking almost absently to his left and right, Harry shrugged at Sirius Black and entered the large ornate office room as his name was called, somewhat coldly and sharply. He, and a few of the members of his squad, had been called to the Ministry

*(demand your presence on the 27<sup>th</sup>...)*

a day ago by the oversight committee of the ever-effective International Confederation, which had sent a team of highly trained 'experts', who were here to decide whether or not Britain qualified for further international assistance.

Harry couldn't care less what they did, and - depending on their attitude - he was going to tell them so. His exploits over the past month had spread like wildfire to the ears of the strongest political-power wielders in the world. Other countries were, unfoundedly, troubled by his presence. The fact of the matter was, he was too powerful - a threat. Harry realised all this, and it did make him feel in control... if not a little queasy.

There was another reason for this complete waste of time though, and Harry knew the international community was being called into

this war reluctantly, as it had been in his own world. They were afraid; it was simple human nature to flee from a stronger adversary. Britain had stood relatively alone for twenty years against the Dark Lord, and many parties had grown complacent.

Harry entered the office of the Minister and his eyes fell first on Bartemius Crouch himself, who was seated behind his desk. The Minister nodded to him professionally, showing no emotion upon his stern face. Harry then looked to the right of the desk - towards a woman who was seated at a smaller desk of her own, shuffling parchment in what appeared to be a cruel way to Harry.

Standing just inside the door, Harry waited for someone to say something - but neither the Minister nor this other witch was forthcoming with anything vital, so Harry sighed.

"Should I... should I pop back later?" he asked, shrugging.

The witch, who looked to be about in her late thirties - perhaps early forties - glared up at him sharply as if she had been disturbed in doing something important. Harry frowned in confusion. He hadn't interrupted her, he had come at her request and when she had called a minute ago.

"Take a seat," she said curtly, pointing towards the chair that was placed equally between the desk of the Minister and the committee witch, so everyone in the room had an equal view of everyone else.

Harry sat, and now that he viewed the woman from a closer position, he guessed that she was probably somewhere in her forties. Brown hair tumbled down to her shoulders, brown hair that was streaked with grey in many places. Age lines and wrinkles adorned her face in all the usual and expected places, and this helped to define her face and made her appear formidable.

*At least formidable to most,* Harry thought, looking down at the blood-stained bandage on his right hand. The black rose cuts that had appeared within a dream, that had encroached upon reality - broken a boundary, one might say - and cut his hand in about a dozen different places. Magic hadn't been able to heal these small wounds, some force prevented it, but where magic failed time would succeed.

*Formidable to most, not me though, not when I think of that... man... from the dream... or Voldemort.*

"This is Madam Feldon, Mr. Potter," Bartemius Crouch said, his eyes clouded and dark - giving nothing away, except perhaps his distaste for this International Confederation representative. Harry made a small note of that.

"Good afterno-" Harry began.

"Let me make something very clear from the start, Mr. Potter," the Feldon woman began, somewhat angrily. "I've read the reports on you and your behaviour, and I have to say what I've read has shocked and appalled me, my superiors - some of the most influential people in the world - and the rest of the oversight committee.

"Your actions in most situations over the past month have been extreme, and we at the IC have no patience for such brutality and the disregard for human life that you have shown. This will be taken into account when we complete our investigation -"

"That's all you people do, isn't it?" Harry said suddenly, quickly losing his temper. His voice seemed to reverberate around the room, dwarfing that of this arrogant witch. "Investigate this and that, discuss whether or not to take action while people are dying. Don't lecture me on my actions - you don't know me! You've read reports that I've never seen to confirm or deny, they could say anything."

Madam Feldon glared, and lifted a pair of spectacles from around her neck up onto the bridge of her nose. She picked up a piece of parchment from on top of the pile in front of her, as Crouch coughed pointedly and looked warningly at Harry.

"These are IC confirmed reports, Mr. Potter," Feldon began, waving the parchment towards Harry. "Their validity need not be questioned, they are *always* accurate."

Harry shrugged, leaned back in his chair, and waved his bandaged right hand indifferently. "Blind faith is always idiotic," he mumbled, bringing his hand down to rest on the hard and possibly unbreakable piece of chest armour he wore beneath a pair of black robes. Basilisk

armour that he had collected from the armourer's yesterday. "Let's get on with it then."

Madam Feldon glared once again and then began to speak about some IC law that Harry only vaguely listened to, he was thinking now about his armour - and that of his squad members. "Law 57, Paragraph 415 - proper use of magical force during times of conflict...."

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*Harry stepped into the dark and heavily scented armourer's shop along the busy street of Diagon Alley. He walked past the rows of swords and leather jerkins, past the rows of dragon armour and over towards Marcus Elendil, who sat behind the counter on a large wooden stool.*

*The tall man, his arms knotted with muscles, looked up as Harry approached and his smile was honest as he saw who had entered his shop. And why shouldn't it be? Harry had, after all, made the man a fortune with the basilisk hide.*

*Harry recalled the event a few days earlier, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> - when he had been sent a Portkey by owl post from Marcus, which he could attach to the basilisk hide down in the Chamber of Secrets, and have it transported to a warehouse owned by Marcus where he could slice and dice the hide - making some of the rarest and finest armour in existence.*

*Marcus had promised him a set of armour for each of his squad members within four days of receiving the hide, and he had delivered on that promise. Apparently working night and day enthusiastically on the task - having been the only armourer for centuries to work on the strongest hide in the world.*

*"Eight of the strongest sets in the world, Harry," Marcus said proudly, lifting a large trunk that was weightless onto the counter between the two of them. "Free of charge, of course. You've made me a very rich man."*

*"Happy to do it," Harry said, realising he'd have to levitate the weightless trunk - as his injured right hand couldn't take even the weight of an empty trunk.*

*"They're all yours," the large man continued, still smiling. "Trunk is weightless, take 'em whenever you like."*

*"How well do the test up against magic?" Harry had asked.*

*Marcus's smile grew. "I doubt nothing short of the Killing Curse will even tickle you, wearing what's in this trunk. Non-magical attacks would be pointless against this armour. You could be hit in the chest with a sledgehammer and not feel a thing. This stuff is not very thick or heavy, it doesn't need to be, and I doubt there's a harder substance in this world - or any other for that matter!"*

*Harry looked up sharply at the mention of another world, but he shrugged it off as coincidence. "Did you put the -er- the emblem on the front of the chest piece?" he asked.*

*Marcus nodded slowly. "Strange one that. Why did you want a white rose etched into the plate?" he asked.*

*Harry shrugged. "Don't know. Just seemed right... for some reason. Confuses the hell out of me, but it just seems... right."*

*Marcus remained silent and confused as Harry said his goodbyes, and levitated the trunk out of his shop. That Marcus never saw The Boy Who Lived again.*

*\*\*\*\**

Harry blinked and fell out of his memories and back into the Minister's office. He stared for a moment at the IC witch with growing distaste, wanting to leave the room now without argument - saving them all a lot of trouble. That wouldn't be happening though.

"As I've said, Mr. Potter, the fact that you're underage and have been given almost total control over British Ministry resources is astounding. We at the International Confederation would like to know

what the Minister was thinking! International feeling on this matter, amongst others, has completely shocked me and my superiors.

Crouch was silent but glaring, so Harry spoke. "Shocked you or scared you?" he asked, smiling politely.

Madam Feldon bristled. "Be warned, Mr. Potter," she began icily. "International law states quite clearly the punishment for war crimes-"

Harry laughed harshly, running a hand back through his hair as he did. "You and the countries you represent are not at war!" he laughed. "You've left Britain and to some lesser extent France to face the threat of Voldemort alone for over twenty years."

"This conflict was deemed minor by IC professionally trained assessors. International aid was all we were willing to offer - we had no need to commit forces to this war."

"Bollocks," Harry stated eloquently. "You were scared then and you're scared now - because Britain is close to falling, and if that happens Voldemort won't just call it quits here. No, you realised too late that this is a global threat, and now you're trying to make it look like you're doing something!"

Crouch coughed what could have been a murmur of approval at that, and Madam Feldon continued to glare. Harry began to think her face was stuck permanently in that expression. "You are not here to question the policy of the International Confederation, Mr. Potter," she growled. "Bear in mind that I will be making my assessment personally to the assembled Confederation in a week's time. Your chances for military assistance rest with me."

Harry frowned and waved his hand dismissively. "To be completely honest," he began, "I don't give a damn! Britain doesn't want or need your help - we'll stand alone, like we have done more than once over the last century."

"What do you mean?" Feldon fumed.

Harry scowled, and leaned forward in his chair. "Well, if I remember my history lessons correctly, Britain has so far faced Grindelwald and



Voldemort alone over this past century. When it comes to dark wizards we seem to be some sort of starting point for their destruction. Do you know why that is? They're trying to destroy the biggest threat to their taking power.

"Britain is and will always be the strongest magical country on the face of the earth, and we won't forget this war, nor the other, when any of the countries you represent need assistance. Mark my words on that one!"

A cold silence fell over the Minister's office and Harry watched Madam Feldon gaping like a fish for a few seconds before she tried to reassert her control, and swing the argument back onto him.

"Mr. Potter," she said, gritting her teeth. "We are here today to discuss you... not past events. Behave yourself or I'll have no choice but to have you arrested for hindering an IC investigation."

Harry snorted a small laugh. "Whatever... let's get on with it then. Sooner it's done the sooner I can leave."

Madam Feldon continued to glare unwaveringly and Harry began to feel tired. "Very well. Let's start with the report of your apparent death six years ago in a dark wizard attack on... Diagon Alley. Care to explain what happened there?"

"No."

"Mr. Potter! You are bound by international law to answer my questions to the best of your ability. One more remark like that and you will be breaking the law. Believe me when I say I will not lose any sleep over having you incarcerated."

Harry couldn't have cared less at that point. "Next question," he said, forcing some power into his words that all took notice of. He was losing his temper.

Madam Feldon coughed to clear her throat and then produced a parchment file and began to recite a list of meaningless dates to Harry - accept until she reached events after March 21<sup>st</sup> of this year.

"Do you deny, Mr. Potter, that since your apparent resurrection a month ago - you've been responsible for the deaths of several dozen individuals. Using excessive force, which I would've thought unbelievable except for the hundreds of eye witness reports, and inciting panic amongst international communities."

Harry was nodding slowly as she said this, and when she had finished he turned to look at Crouch with a small smile on his lips. "Is anyone else hungry?" he asked. "What do you say we head out into Muggle London for some fish and chips?"

There was a loud slapping sound as Madam Feldon threw her file down onto the hard oak desk. "That does it, Mr. Potter. I find you to be inexcusably hostile and disruptive. The International Confederation will hear of this and you will be brought before them on charges of war crimes.

"You have just destroyed any chance of receiving international help during this conflict. You're a murderer, nothing more, and justice will see you properly punished. You use excessive force, violence in situations that don't require it. This is no place for world forces. Am I understood?"

Crouch was on his feet, his face flustered red as he opened his mouth to speak. Harry beat him to it.

"Yep, you're understood," he said, keeping his own temper in check. "But what I do... It's just the way it is. I do what I do because I live in the real world, where are you right now?"

Madam Feldon had risen as well, looking at Crouch for assistance and to see reason. He wouldn't give it, because he knew Harry was right. He turned to the IC woman and gave the United Kingdom's official statement on this matter.

"Britain doesn't want or need your help," Crouch said, echoing Harry, his voice deep and honest. "Go back to your precious Confederation and tell them that. It's too late, I realised that years ago but didn't back out because we could have used your help then. Not anymore though... I am officially withdrawing Britain from the International Alliance - because it means next to nothing to you cowards.

"You are excused, Madam Feldon, please take yourself and your committee to the nearest floo hub. We have a war to fight, and you are in our way."

Madam Feldon had paled considerably and was staring between Crouch and Harry in complete and utter disbelief. "You... you can't be serious-"

"I am serious, Madam," Crouch said, just as strongly as before. "Britain will deal with her own problems - the rest of you be damned. It will be a long time before we forget these last twenty years."

\*\*\*\*

*April 30<sup>th</sup>*

Smooth, strong, polished wood flowed underneath Harry's rough and blistered hands. He ran his left hand down the length of the broom he would be riding for the Quidditch match in about half an hour, alongside his father and brother.

The WindStream, a racing broom of world standard. Able to accelerate from zero to a hundred and fifty *miles* per hour in just three seconds. Harry had never been on anything so fast in his life. He thought for a moment that the word 'stream' seemed rather poignant in the title of this broom - and marked it off as another strange coincidence.

"You almost ready, Harry?" James asked, pulling a pair of black robes on over his normal clothes. "Stands are really filling up out there."

"Ready whenever you are," Harry replied, grasping the broom handle and standing up.

There was a crash across the room and Harry ducked as another broomstick shot over his head and into the wall behind him. "What...?"

"Oops," growled a nervous voice, and Harry turned to face Dernas. "Been awhile since I got on a broom," he explained, grinning slightly. "Guess there wasn't enough room in here."

They were in the changing rooms beneath the Quidditch stands and Harry smiled and threw Dernas his broom back. "You'll be right," he said, thinking how the Dernas of his own world had managed on that fateful final day over a month ago. "It's like riding a bike."

Harry leaned against the wall and felt a rush of exhilaration. He was looking forward to playing Quidditch again, after being away from the sport for so many battle scarred months. Glancing around the changing rooms, he looked at his team mates. There was James and Michael, of course, Chasers the both of them. Michael's friend Connor Brady - a second year who Harry had never met anywhere before - was the third Chaser.

Connor stood at about five foot and was adorned with long, wiry blonde hair that covered his eyes so much that he was constantly pushing it back. Brown eyes that glittered with excitement were staring out from behind that hair now, occasionally glancing nervously towards Harry. Harry thought he'd do fine.

Sirius stood near Dernas and he was trying not to laugh at his attempts to mount his broom. Both he and Dernas would be the teams Beaters. Harry thought that that would be very interesting, and shook his head as Dernas fell to the ground.

The final member of the team was a fourth year Gryffindor that Harry vaguely remembered knowing in his own world. He didn't know her that well, but he recalled her name was Kimberly. She was the reserve Keeper for the Gryffindor house team in this world, and they had kindly leant her to them for the friendly match.

"Let's get ready then," James said excitedly, slinging his broom across his shoulders. "We want to make this last a good hour or so, so have some fun - don't catch the snitch in the first five minutes, Harry - and let's make it interesting."

Harry had forgotten, *Oh how he had forgotten*, how good it felt to be in the air above a screaming excited Quidditch pitch. He flew high

after the Quaffle was released and didn't bother to search for the Snitch yet. He was simply absorbing the rush of joy that being above the stands gave him.

The WindStream seemed to respond to his very thoughts, gliding softly above the pitch in a slow zigzag pattern. Harry was the highest player in the air by far. He watched the other members of both teams flying back and forth at breakneck speeds across the sky, to the joy and entertainment of the hundreds of excited students in the stands.

He arched up slightly and sunlight was refracted off his glasses and into his eyes. He shook his head and blinked to clear his eyes and then fell a few feet as he caught sight of the small golden ball, twinkling in the sunlight dazzlingly. Instinct took over and he would have had it in a matter of seconds, if not for the fact that they were only five or so minutes into the game.

At the last moment, Harry pulled up and the golden ball fluttered past his right ear. He didn't make an attempt to follow it.

"A NEAR MISS FOR THE OLDER TEAM'S SEEKER, HARRY POTTER," a magically amplified voice bellowed from the announcer's box in the stands. Harry didn't recognise it.

He glanced quickly over at the Gryffindor team's Seeker, saw her looking up at him from several feet away, and then shoot off in another direction. Harry watched her flowing auburn-red hair streaming out behind her like a raging river, and then turned away from Ginny Weasley with his eyes closed - and a pain of longing in his chest.

He ignored it - what else could he do?

"PROFESSOR POTTER WITH THE QUAFFLE, ATTACKING THE GRYFFINDOR KEEPER AND TEAM CAPTAIN, RON WEASLEY, HEAD ON. HE'S ALL ON HIS OWN FOLKS - SCORE!"

Harry watched as cheers erupted from the crowd and Ron collected the Quaffle to throw back out to his team. *10-0 to us*, he thought, putting on a burst of speed and rocketing to the other end of the pitch in mere seconds.

"FIRST BLOOD TO THE OLD GUYS," the announcer bellowed, and the game continued.

The cup-winners were quick to recover from that first goal, and scored three in quick succession, bringing the score to 10-30.

Harry watched the game from his high vantage point and spotted the Snitch twice during the next twenty minutes, during which the scores were tied off level at 50-50. He saw Ginny spotted it once but, just like him, she was waiting until the game progressed a bit further.

The crowd was wild and the cheers loud as Gryffindor pulled ahead by another two goals in the following five minutes. Since this was, primarily, a friendly match - the Beaters weren't attacking with the ferocity they would have if they were playing, say, Slytherin - so the scores continued to rise fast. At the end of half an hour, the scores were 70-90 to Gryffindor, and everyone was in good spirits.

James, Michael and Connor worked well together as Chasers - they were good, perhaps with the potential to be great, and they moved as one. The score was tied off again at 90 two goals later, and the crowds cheered wildly.

It was a hot cloudless day, and Harry was grateful for the cool airflow that blew around and into him up above the pitch. A small band of sweat had developed across his forehead, but that was to be expected. He glided effortlessly down in spirals, remaining above everyone else. His eyes scanned the field for the golden Snitch - but for now he couldn't see it.

Circling back up, Harry flew over to the goalposts at the opposite end of the field, and checked there for the elusive golden ball. He didn't see it, but that didn't deter him. Flying high again, Harry shook his head as a wave of unexpected dizziness washed over him.

That did no good - a sharp and cold bolt of pure pain ripped across his forehead mercilessly and Harry swayed on his broom as

*Let the world slide. One real world is enough.*

his vision grew dark and hazy. Harry froze, and his knuckles grew white with the strain upon which he grasped the broom handle. It was, again, to Harry that the entire world had become nothing more than a hazy picture on a poor television set.

It was more than that this time though - the black haze deepened, and the world all but disappeared before his eyes, leaving him in a... *nothing* of existence that was beyond freezing, and barren - a world of dark death and bitter ice.

Harry eye's snapped open quickly and viciously, his world once again flooding with harsh sunlight. Barely two seconds had past in this time, and he was flying over the Quidditch pitch, still the highest player in the air.

A deep, harsh rattling sound was emanating from somewhere and it took a shocked and shaken Harry a second to realise that it was himself struggling for breath through what he now realised was a frozen throat.

Confusion swept through his mind as he shivered uncontrollably and fell a few feet on his broom. *He was so cold....* his hands were frozen to the handle of his broom, and he pulled one free with a crackling of ice and frost. It was a very hot day in this world, and he could see his breath condensing on the air into fog which dissipated almost instantly.

Heat washed into his system fast, like water in a flash flood, and it was a shock. An unrelenting stab of pain splintered into his skull and he fell further on the broom as his body coped with the shock of going from warm - to cold - to warm again in a matter of timeless seconds.

*God.... what the hell is happening to me?* he screamed this thought to his mind, as the pain began to lessen and his overall temperature began to stabilise. Shaken and scared, Harry descended half a dozen feet and decided he couldn't know the answer to his question, not yet. He had a rough idea as to what was happening - but that terrified him.

*Not me,* he thought. *Everything else. Something is happening to... to reality... and I'm sensitive to it. I can feel it... because I shouldn't be in this version of reality. I'm not tuned to it.*

Harry instinctively knew that to be true. Something was wrong with this world, perhaps all worlds, and he was the only one that could see it because he didn't belong. He wasn't part of the system - he was viewing it as an outsider, a wanderer in a foreign land. No one else could do that, no one else knew that anything was wrong.

Falling out of his thoughts, Harry swerved to avoid a wide bludger and caught sight of the Snitch hovering near the Gryffindor goal post about two hundred feet away. He didn't shoot after it but did mark its position. He had found over the years that sometimes the Snitch did like to hang around the goalposts.

"ANOTHER GOAL TO GRYFFINDOR!" bellowed the announcer, and the crowds exploded with approval. "THAT'S A HUNDRED AND TEN FOR THE CUP HOLDERS, AND NINETY FOR THE OTHER GUYS."

Harry tried to concentrate on the game, as it was one of the few things in his life he could actually enjoy doing, but he felt cold now - even in the heat. It wasn't like the cold he had felt a moment ago, it was the cold that fell upon him in the calm before a battle. His instinct could be used to describe it more accurately. He sensed, somehow - perhaps through magic - that something big was on the horizon, some huge battle that would be fought out of time, and this plane of existence.

*It would be a battle for existence, he thought suddenly. A battle to save it from... from... Voldemort...? Perhaps, eventually, but there'll be something before that....*

Harry felt another headache forming, and lost the concentration he had developed in that moment. Everything in his mind fell away like water through a sieve and he was left wondering what it could all mean.

"GRYFFINDOR SCORE AGAIN!"

Harry looked down upon his team mates below and saw everyone smiling and enjoying the game - having a good time - it looked like fun. He circled the pitch lazily a few more times, glancing in all directions for the Snitch half-heartedly - his tired and battle hardened mind otherwise occupied.



Time stretched on, as it had a way of doing, and the scores of the two opposing teams grew ever-larger, and the hunt for the Snitch was on for real now between Harry and Ginny. Harry's mind was preoccupied with thoughts of destiny and Voldemort - his Voldemort - though, and he didn't see the Snitch for at least ten minutes after Ginny had made a quick dive for it, and missed.

Like he had thought it would be, the golden ball was hovering just above the grass near the Gryffindor goalpost. Harry's sharp eyes connected with the tiny fluttering wings over three hundred feet away and up, and he fell into a quick dive for the ball.

His broom was unmatched, and Ginny Weasley was too busy searching at the other end of the field to see where the golden ball really was, when Harry made his move for the Snitch. For years after this game, most of the people who witnessed Harry's catch - for he did catch it - deemed it impossible, and yet somehow it had just... been.

Being rather famous and revered, all eyes were upon the falling lone Seeker as he descended for what must have been the first time in over an hour. Guiding the broom with subtle touches here and there, Harry fell fast and locked his legs tightly around the wooden beam between them.

He let go of the broom, his arms rising slowly - gracefully - and controlled it with his locked legs. Barely six feet above the ground, Harry flicked his right leg hard and the broom spun him upside down, so he was flying at an amazing speed along the length of the field towards the goalposts, his fingers brushing the finely cut grass of the pitch.

"AND WHAT IS POTTER DOING!?" cried the announcer, and then answered his own question. "HE'S GOING FOR THE SNITCH! NEVER IN ANY QUIDDITCH MAT-"

Harry drowned out all sound until he could only hear the small buzzing that emanated from the flapping gold wings, and just as he reached the goalposts - where the Snitch hovered now a foot or so away - Harry leaned back upside down, pulled his legs downward on the broom's tail and reached out to win the game with his left hand.

It was all over in the blink of an eye, as Harry flipped in the air - now flying away from the goalposts the right way up, and holding the Snitch victoriously as, slowly at first, cheers of surprise and then admiration bellowed from the assembled stands.

Harry had secured the victory for his team and they were now flying around the pitch above him happily, slapping one another on the back - shaking hands with the students of the Gryffindor house team. Sirius flew down at one point and grasped Harry on the shoulder before flying high into the sky again. Harry didn't even feel it - Sirius was supposed to be dead, and his addled mind insisted it was so.

Alone again, Harry dropped the Snitch and dismounted his broom near the edge of the pitch by the alley between the stands where he could exit back up to the castle. Turning his back on the loud cheers, Harry left the pitch and as he did another sharp nail of pain was hammering in his mind.

Staggering slightly, the Boy Who Lived died a little more.

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*Harry was floating... he was floating and dying defiantly. His jeans hung torn and bloody around his waist and he was bare-chested, with more blood and dirt staining his chest and arms. He was standing almost naked against eternity.*

*"Renounce the fight!" an all consuming, utterly satanic and purely evil voice cried from somewhere within or around Harry and the darkness he could see. "Die, mortal. Die with innocent blood seeping into your soul...."*

*It seemed to Harry, as he stood there in the darkness - battle worn and dying - that he was observing himself speak from outside of his broken body. That he was just a bystander as he... himself... Harry Potter... defied the voice of Death - of Evil itself.*

*"There are thorns everywhere, but along the path of vice, roses bloom above them," Harry said, his voice strong and powerful despite the dying condition his body was in.*

*"Rose or not nothing can deny me," the Demon of evil incarnate replied, mocking the lone hero. "Defiance will always be wrought in blood, in death. Redemption will never be yours, Potter. To postpone the inevitable only costs billions of worlds their existence. END IT!"*

*Harry smiled and his grin revealed several missing teeth and the ones that were there were bloodied red. "Beelzebub, that you?" he cried into the darkness. "That is not dead which can eternal lie. Yet with strange aeons even Death may die."*

*Laughing into the darkness, Harry - the Harry seemingly floating around his own body - felt the demon in the darkness roar with anger and fury. He almost cowered away when bright spots of light flooded the area around his body, and the demon itself was shown.*

*It was the smiling, laughing man from his other dreams - and the floating Harry screamed in fear, but he saw that his body - himself - didn't even flinch, but smiled. The demon wasn't smiling now though, its male face was twisted in a grotesque image of hate, anger, and... was it fear?*

*"How utterly pointless everything you have ever done is!" exclaimed the demon, twirling a dark black rose between his fingers - deftly avoiding the thorns.*

*Harry watched himself laugh. "Not pointless - unique!"*

*Cold ice flared in the eyes above the roughly stubbled face of the demon, and the black rose exploded in his hands - dark sparks rained down upon the two of them. "Value your words, Potter. Each one may be your last...."*

*"That's not for you to decide," Harry heard himself say. "Destiny - God - has already decided that for us." Harry heard himself say that, but he got the feeling that, somehow, he was beyond destiny - and making his own.*

*The demon grinned now, and it stretched from ear to ear - but to Harry it looked like a grimace of pain. His eyes began to bleed and his forehead tore open, revealing - for just a moment - its true form.*

*Hideous, seething, bloated flesh assaulted Harry's eyes, and then it spoke.*

*"Do I look like someone who cares what God does?" he cackled, and then was gone.*

In the magical community, and the Muggle one, many thoughts and opinions have been given over the significance of dreams. Some see them as the mind replenishing itself, cleaning out the refuse to make way for new energy and thought. Others see them as our consciousness speaking for itself, and others still consider them prophetic to some degree.

No one knew for sure what the purpose of dreaming was, but to Harry it was only a cause of constant suffering.

Days of almost sleepless hassle passed in this strange-familiar world for Harry. He awoke feeling tired and dejected - waiting for something to happen for almost two weeks into May.

After the Quidditch match, Harry had thrown himself into the protection of this world. First by having the Ministry wards remapped and recast, under his, Crouch's, and Dumbledore's key signature. This little change wasn't made known to the Ministry at large, so hopefully if any spy within the government attempted to bring down the old wards, he would find nothing and unmask himself in the process. It was only the beginning, but really all they could do at the Ministry.

There was outrage in the international community when it became public knowledge that Britain had withdrawn from the International Alliance, and only France - who had some idea of the horrors of this war - understood Britain's position. Crouch immediately went on the offensive and the cries began to die down a week after they had begun.

Nothing - at all - was seen or heard from Voldemort and the Death Eaters. Recruitment agents were no longer sighted anywhere, and people began to fall into a hopeful calm, a premature calm, and at times Harry thought that he was the only one who remained alert. He

knew he wasn't, but everything had grown so lax in so short a time. It was unnerving.

Harry spent his days pondering the riddle to the location of Slytherin Fortress, and growing increasingly fatigued and worried as the world seemed to fall apart around him, and everyone carried on as if that were normal. He hadn't breached this topic with anyone yet - say... Dumbledore - and he wasn't about to. Harry was alone in this world.

All around him were familiar strangers, and enemies. *It was dark and getting darker, and the dawn seemed forever away.*

Tired grey bags hung heavily under Harry's eyes every hour of every day. Sleep, even with dreamless sleep potion, rarely lasted more than four hours a night, or early morning to be more specific. He was tired, beyond tired, but everything was happening and nothing was happening at all.

It was like the calm before the storm, except the calm wasn't so calm. *It was a madness before the storm.* Whatever was happening to this world, to existence, was draining him physically as he continued to grow stronger magically. It was killing him, and he could do nothing about it until the equinox.

*"You look tired," Sirius had commented.*

*Harry had laughed bitterly. "This world looks no better," he had replied. "And I think all the others are on the edge as well. But don't worry, you can't see it, and I'll fix it."*

He had said that to Sirius and it had left him confused, he had said it to himself as he was trying to fall asleep and felt certain that it would never be that simple or easy. This was another riddle, he realised, a larger much more complex riddle - and everything hung on his solving it, soon.

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May 15<sup>th</sup>

May 15<sup>th</sup> was one of the hottest May days in over twelve years. Harry awoke early - four thirty in the morning, after falling asleep just after midnight - and wondered what the hell he was going to do today. There was nothing for him to do, really, until he found Voldemort or the equinox rolled around.

The dark humour wasn't lost on him. He had been nearly killed almost more than once a week over the last four months, he had broken the boundary between universes, he was at the head of more than one war - and yet he was bored. Or more specifically, frustrated.

Nothing was happening, and that was tiring him - and making him feel useless.

Breakfast that morning consisted of a small goblet of pumpkin juice and a few slices of toast pilfered from the kitchens where - Harry had noticed with some remorse - there was no Dobby. For all he knew, the house elf was still enslaved to the Malfoy's or didn't even exist in this world.

There was a meeting to be held today with his team but that wasn't for a good eight hours, and Harry doubted anything productive would actually occur then. There were no attacks - anywhere - and Voldemort was in hiding. They were searching high and low but magic had a way of making sure if you didn't want to be found you probably wouldn't be.

So Harry did what he had been doing almost on a daily basis the past fortnight. He went to the library and walked through the stacks, summoning various magical books to him as he approached one of the wooden tables near the large, sparkling window that looked out over the lake.

*It could never hurt, he thought, to know more defence magic.*

He wasn't just learning defence though, as that would never keep him alive for long. The best defence is always a good offence, so Harry spent his afternoons away from the library, and used the Room of Requirement to practice magic of a more... darker nature.

A duelling platform sat square in the middle of the requiring room, and on it stood three dozen wooden dummies, all arranged in a square - surrounding an attacker who stood within the middle of the square.

At that moment, the attacker was Harry, and at that moment he was lost deep in his thoughts and magic. Standing unflinchingly, making not a single sound, barely drawing more than short gasps of breath, Harry meditated - for use of a better word - with his eyes closed and his palms glowing with dangerous light.

The air crackled around him with magic as he fell further into the vast resource of power that dwelt within him - calling it forward, harnessing it in a way no other wizard or witch ever had.

"Come on..." Harry whispered, shaking from the rush of pure magic surging through every one of his veins.

Harry had been practicing this for the past few days, and he was slowly developing a skill he thought would be unmatched - by anyone. Blue sparks of power, of electricity and fire, rippled and burnt across his arms, right up to the shoulder which was protected by the basilisk armour.

"Yes..."

Over the past year, in both worlds, Harry had noticed the crackling blue sparks of power that rippled on his skin when he was feeling very emotional, in particular when he was angry or in the heat of a battle. He hadn't ignored or forgotten this strange display of power, and was working on a way now to harness that phenomenon, and use it as a weapon.

There was the hum of magic and electricity in the air; all of Harry's senses were reacting to it. He could smell the sting of it, feel the flow of it, and taste the purity of it...

*Harry opened his eyes.*

For a moment the same blue fire that rippled up and down his arms shone behind his emerald green eyes, and they glowed blue for a few

seconds. Then he lost control, as his arms were wreathed in the blue electric fire. It didn't hurt him; it never could, as it was a part of him, but large jolts of flame erupted in every direction from his coated arms, and wreaked destruction upon the room.

Two dozen of the spell dummies exploded into hundreds of splinters of useless wood and went whistling through the air as they were struck with the full intensity of the electric fire. The walls were pockmarked with black, sooty burns - as were the floors - and dust from the broken stone rained down around Harry.

"AH!" he cried, and brought his powerful arms together, dispelling the blue flame and breathing heavily.

Collapsing to one knee, Harry struggled for breath for a moment and looked around at the destruction. *Not bad, he thought, getting better and quicker anyway. Just got to learn to direct it and keep it controlled.*

A small smile played at the corners of his lips as he exited the room.

Later that evening Harry re-entered the Room of Requirement and found no signs that it had been very nearly destroyed that afternoon. He hadn't expected to find any signs either, like he hadn't the other few days he'd been experimenting with this force.

However, he did find seven people waiting for him around a large ornate circular table, and as Harry entered the room a vase of large and elegant white roses appeared out of thin air with a spark of magic. This didn't surprise any of the eight people now in the room, as Harry had been doing it for the last four meetings - ever since they'd received the armour with the rose engraved upon it.

All of those present found it somehow fitting, and yet couldn't think of any reason why. Harry didn't know either.

"You look beat, kid," Sirius offered as Harry sat down. "What's getting you down?"



Harry yawned and twisted his head until his neck clicked with a satisfying crack. "Bored to tears," he said with a rough smile. "Pulling twenty hour days and hardly doing a thing."

Dermas clicked his teeth thoughtfully. "Dreamless sleep potion keepin' you awake?" he asked.

Harry shrugged. "Doesn't help much anymore, no," he replied, and caught all of the worried glances directed towards him. "But let me handle that... any news?"

The Indian man Art Nuan, who was stroking his beard, spoke up first. "Bounty hunter sightings have been down to a minimum over the last few weeks, Commander," he said calmly. "Your... *no tolerance...* approach, has rattled most of them - especially after you stopped BlackDragon-1, who were held as one of the elite in the bounty hunter community."

"Good," Harry nodded. "Sophia, French Aurors?"

Sophia Tréla, the blonde haired duellist who was extremely quick on the draw, drew a small smile. "Approve of Britain's withdrawal from the International Alliance. There is talk of a greater alliance between our two nations, a recognised alliance that will result in more Aurors from France coming here."

Nodding again, Harry turned to Nymphadora Tonks. "Any news from the Ministry concerning Voldemort, or that riddle to his fortress?"

"None whatsoever," Tonks replied dejectedly. "It just doesn't make any sense. Nothing... there's nothing. No sign of Death Eaters or even the recruitment wizards anymore. Dementors are still missing as well."

"Do we still think he'll attack the Ministry?" Thomas Fright asked, and Grace Arnair nodded in agreement.

"Perhaps," Dermas said, shaking his head. "Though Voldemort's not stupid. He'll know Harry can be at the Ministry in seconds, if needs be, and that will put an end to any attack quickly."

Silence for a few thoughtful moments.

"Then Harry's life may be in danger," Sirius said, and then caught his tongue as he realised he'd just stated the bleeding obvious. "Well... you know what I mean...."

"No, I don't think we do," Dermal said, smiling.

Sophia had understood better. "The Commander's life may be in danger because he can stop any possible attack against the Ministry. The first new attacks might fall here first, in an attempt to kill him and leave this world basically defenceless."

"Good point," Fright nodded. "It may not even be a full blown attack - could be something small..."

Harry had been tapping his fingers thoughtfully on the side of his chair, and looking longingly at the pale band of skin on his index finger where the silver ring he had received from Ginny had sat since Christmas until March 20<sup>th</sup>. His Ginny had kept that ring when he had stepped into the boundary. It was his promise to her that he was coming back.

"Whatever happens will happen," he told them. "I'm probably going to be looking over my shoulder for the rest of my life - however long that will be - and I've survived this far on my own. Let them do their worst."

"That seems rather reckless, Commander," Sophia commented, arching her left eyebrow.

Harry sighed. "It's not realistic that I can, or should, be guarded twenty four hours a day - no. I'll just carry on as I have been, always assuming the worst."

The white roses in the centre of the table gleamed with moisture and seemed to sparkle in the torch light. Harry's eyes glazed over in confusion as he beheld them, and he fell into his thoughts and memories - not hearing the discussion continuing around him.

*Gather ye rose-buds while ye may, Old Time is still a-flying, And this same flower that smiles today, Tomorrow will be dying.*

Shuddering as that verse appeared in his mind out of nowhere; Harry shook his head and returned to the world of the living. When he fell back into the discussion, Sirius had just mentioned something important.

"The dark detectors around the school were re-cast today," he said. "They'd been growing weaker over the last few years - getting too much use, so they were taken down and cast again by Dumbledore. He made a few modifications, but this is the first time in over a century they've been renewed. It should be stronger."

"That's good," Harry nodded absently.

The conversation carried on for a good few more hours into the night, and near midnight Harry crawled into his bed up in Gryffindor Tower - tired beyond measure. Sleep didn't come easy, it probably never would again, but it did eventually come. He had nightmares, in which he destroyed worlds, and grappled with the demon.

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*May 30<sup>th</sup>*

## ***HOPE IS BUT A WAKING DREAM***

*Special Correspondent Felice Garnet*

*Have we seen the end of the Dark War and just not realised it? Has this month of peace been the beginning of a new era in which we may live in a world free from war?*

*Thirty eight days have past since the last reported sight of a Death Eater was confirmed in the British Isles, and our society has timidly begun to prosper and rebuild itself after twenty years of horrific war. But is all this peace just a farce, a false peace.*

The Ministry, after shocking the world by removing the United Kingdom from the International Alliance, warns us all to still be on our guard, that the threat is still there. You-Know-Who lives, as do his armies, and attack could come at anytime.

Our dark world has been getting progressively lighter over the last two months, with the hope of the people falling on the shoulders of a sixth year Hogwarts student. There is probably not a single magical person in Britain that hasn't heard of Harry Potter.

Heroism has been shown in many forms over the last twenty years - through the efforts of each and every one of us who have been desperately trying to hold on and make a difference. But we were still only just surviving.

Given a field commission as a Commander in our armed forces, Harry Potter has turned this war around for the Light - and whilst we relax back into the relative comfort of peace, Potter and the Ministry are searching the world for You-Know-Who.

We have grown too relaxed in the months we have been free from attack. The Prophet, would like to take this opportunity to remind our readers that we are still at war, that we are not free from evil yet.

As the great wizard Aristotle once said, hope is a waking dream. Don't fall asleep Britain, use this time of peace we have to build your home defences, report anything you see as suspicious to the Ministry by Owl, and above all remain vigilant.

## **cont. 2**

Albus Dumbledore drained his goblet of pumpkin juice and glanced out above his copy of the *Prophet* at the sea of young faces that sat before him at their house tables. For the first time in he didn't know

how long - perhaps fifteen years - he saw the laughing, smiling, carefree faces of youth, and realised most of them had already put the war to the back of their minds.

*The blow will be worse when Tom returns, Dumbledore thought. It may be calm now, and every one of them may have lived their entire lives under the threat of war, but they're growing careless nonetheless.*

Dumbledore pondered this for a moment, and then decided they had ever right to. School children shouldn't have to live in a war, let alone fight in one. His thoughts then turned to Harry Potter, and the role he played on a universal scale. It was huge; there was more to that boy than just two worlds.

In time he may learn how much, but Dumbledore believed Harry would - perhaps one day soon - reach above the power of those who control the way between worlds. That could be extraordinary, too grand even for his mind to comprehend. His thoughts returned to what seemed a smaller issue, when put aside one of Harry's.

The disappearance of Voldemort. April and May nothing had been seen, or heard, and that was the longest absence in twenty years. *Any day now*, Dumbledore thought. *Any day we're going to be attacked - somewhere.* If anything, this bout of peace was more unnerving than knowing Voldemort was active.

As if his thoughts had awoken the devil, Dumbledore suddenly felt a disturbing pull at the back of his mind, a moment later Fawkes, his brilliant phoenix, appeared before him with an ear-splitting cry of dismay.

Dumbledore was on his feet in a second, just as an almighty roar shook the Great Hall. It was the call of some wild animal, and everyone in the Hall jumped as if stung. Everyone except Dumbledore, who was already racing down between the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw house tables, Fawkes flying before him.

*He's back*, was Dumbledore's only thought, and then another ear-wrenching cry filled the castle. Dumbledore's old heart was pounding in his chest - he knew what animal that cry belonged to... *dear God...*

How could he not know when that same animal had almost killed him one hundred years ago in East Africa....

Pounding, loud and desperate, splintered the castle doors in the Entrance Hall, as Dumbledore ran in panting. He immediately sealed the Great Hall doors behind him, protecting his charges first, and then pooled all his magic for some reinforcing spells to place on the bending and cracking main entrance.

He was just about to cast his spells when the assault on the castle doors ceased, and Dumbledore heard a new animal cry - one he associated with an eagle. The pieces fell into place quickly from there, and Dumbledore paled as he figured it out.

*Not an eagle, but a griffin... Harry... no!*

\*\*\*\*

*Five minutes earlier*

Harry had made his way up through the castle to the Astronomy Tower in the early morning. He sat once more upon the wall built along the balcony of the tower, and gazed out almost unseeingly at the world.

Between his hands which rested just above his lap blue electric-fire jumped from one palm to the other. Harry's control over his enormous power had grown tremendously over the last three weeks, as he had been practicing it almost five or six hours a day. It was all about willpower, he had realised about one and a half weeks ago - and Harry had willpower enough to control this blue magic.

Extending the power, his hands were completely enveloped in crackling blue light, that flowed smoothly and without breaks in a dazzling river of power. Concentrating further, he brought it up above his wrists, the tingling feeling on his skin reminding him that this power had the potential to disintegrate a human being.

Up to his elbows was as far as Harry dared to go, and if he could have seen his eyes he would have noticed that they had started to glow blue as well. With a thought and a jerk of his fire encased arms,

Harry made the flame dissipate and for a moment he watched his glowing blue veins fade away.

Then he heard the cry - a cry that was both unknown and deadly. Almost in a blur Harry raised his head and looked down towards the castle gates, at which point his heart jumped into his throat. *My God, I-*

Almost unaware of what he was doing, Harry stood up and realised he was about to jump off the castle again - something he had done more than once over the last few months - with a cry of exhilaration mixed with mingled fear and doubt, Harry felt the wind in his hair.

He was wearing long black denim jeans and a white polo shirt over his basilisk armour, and as he fell they transformed with him into his Animagus form, the griffin. He screeched with fury as he saw the beasts tearing up the castle grounds towards the Entrance Hall.

Wings flew open and caught the air, buffeting Harry back up several dozen feet, before his instinct to fly took over and he angled his wings and head so he was streamlined towards the ground. The castle fell behind him as the ground approached - and Harry saw that these muscular beasts were now already clawing and screaming at the barred castle doors.

*He's back*, was Harry's thought as he fell. *This is a message, he's not gone - it's going to be worse in the long run. Die, Potter, die.*

Time seemed to slow down for Harry as he approached the leopard-like creatures, two of them, that were ripping apart the doors to the castle. And in that time he tried to think what he knew about the magical beast known as the Nundu.

*The Nundu!*

What he knew wasn't much, and unfortunately very disheartening. Considered to be the most dangerous animal in existence... that is usually native to East Africa.... resembles a leopard. How Voldemort had found and controlled a pair he may never know. Its breath was perhaps its biggest defence, carrying death and disease that had wiped out hundreds upon hundreds of people and villages in Africa.

As far as Harry knew, nothing less than a hundred wizards working as one had ever brought down a single Nundu.

*And I'm only one wizard, and there's two of the buggers. This could be interesting... and probably painful.*

Despite the danger, Harry felt good to be fighting and flying again, to be on the edge and know what needed to be done. Voldemort was reaching out for power again, and this was an attempt to kill Harry, as he knew only Harry would face these beasts at Hogwarts, and show the world that know one can stand against him.

*Clever*, Harry thought, but fancied his chances against these monsters nonetheless. *Just have to stay clear of their breath... that's all.*

With his heightened griffin senses, Harry's head rattled when the beasts roared again. He could also smell their stink; it smelt of decay and death. Screeching himself as he banked in the air and came at the nearest monster from above, Harry dug his infinitely sharp talons into the corded muscular hide of the Nundu attacking the door.

He arched his wings back and above his strong body and just hung in the air for a moment, dust and debris whirling around in the wash of air he had created with his powerful wings. His talons barely punctured the spotted hide of the first Nundu, and no sooner had Harry tried than the beast cried out and fell low in his grasp.

The other Nundu wasted no time identifying and attacking the threat. Each of them were roughly the size of an African rhinoceros, and as Harry's claws were ripped free of the first beast, the second pounced from the bottom of the stone steps and Harry, as a griffin, was crushed between one Nundu and the other, with the former biting and clawing at any and all exposed flesh.

Harry was grounded now, as he grappled with these two dangerous and unbelievably powerful animals. One of his wings was bent and flattened against the castle doors as the first Nundu lay underneath him and the other one attacked his still flapping left wing.



Roaring and screeching filled the air and Harry felt white hot pain in one of his hind legs. He turned his eagle head and saw that it was in the jaws of the Nundu beneath him, and blood was already freely flowing. Under all of their combined weight, the stone beneath them cracked and Dumbledore, who stood just the other side of the door, was thrown off his feet as shockwaves trembled through the ground.

Harry screeched again and, with all of his strength, threw the Nundu that was tearing at him from above off and over, where it landed with a thud forty feet away - just the other side of the castle driveway and on a small grassy embankment.

Free from the burden on top of him, Harry spun and righted himself, and with another cry jumped and tore his leg free from the other beast's jaws. He opened his wings as best he could and fell tumbling into the ground on the gravel driveway several dozen feet away. Back on his paws and talons in a flash, Harry backed up as both Nundus growled deeply in their throats and began to circle him.

*Well*, he thought, and even the voice in his head sounded strained and in pain, *at least they're not gonna get into the castle.*

Harry limped backwards, his head low and eyes on his enemies. He cawed and flapped his wings instinctively. His sharp eyes made out a faint green mist rising from the jaws of the Nundu's and he knew that would kill him, or at the least make him very, very sick.

There was a patch of fur missing from both of the Nundus, just on the lower left side of their muscular bodies. Tattooed onto this bare skin was the Dark Mark. Doubt, if there had ever been any, fled from Harry's mind. He knew who was responsible for this.

Adrenalin pumped through his entire system, and that helped dull the pain he felt in his back leg and in the right wing which was slightly bent at that tip. Harry thought that if he transformed back into his human form now, he may have a fractured shoulder bone.

Gravel crunched under the weight of the stinking, sweating beasts, and Harry could feel the power building up in their back legs as they attempted to pounce. The one on his right, nearest to the castle doors pounced first. It felt uncomfortably like getting hit by a sledgehammer,

and Harry was sent tumbling back, cutting his folded wings on the gravel as the beast rolled with him.

The second Nundu fell short as it pounced, and began to jump again, as Harry scratched and bit the monster on top of him. It was doing just as much to him and dozens of small feathers fell from his neck which began to bleed - though thankfully not too deeply.

The hide of the Nundu was so strong that it felt as if he was throwing his eagle's beak into stone, and digging his claws into steel. Harry's lions hide was not as strong, but it was tough and he would have been long dead if it was anything else.

*Anything else except for maybe my armour-*

The second Nundu was upon him, and the three of them became one huge tangled mess of limbs, fur, and flying feathers. The gravel upon the driveway was marred with blood in long streaks from all of the creatures, and several of the small stones were embedded in Harry's back.

*CAW!*

Harry screeched and bit a chunk of the nearest Nundu's nose clean off, and was rewarded with a sharp claw digging deep into his exposed side, retracting and drawing blood.

Harry kicked with his powerful hind legs, and sent one of the beasts skidding and flipping across the rough gravel. It growled and flipped itself back onto its legs and was already coming back at Harry as the other one fell off him.

With a little more effort this time, Harry made it back into a standing position as he faced off with the beasts, who were circling him predatorily. Blood dripped from his beak and from the jaws of the large leopard-like creatures. Knowing instinctively that he couldn't show any sign of weakness, Harry bit back a screech of dismay.

*I'm losing, he thought. Why did I even think I could win? Two hundred wizards would have a hard time taking down these creatures.*

Blood flowed quickly from his exposed side and from dozens of other cuts and scrapes across his entire body. His back leg throbbed with bitter pain and one of the claws on his right talon had been snapped off. A loss, probably, of a fingernail or two in his human form.

The Nundu's seemed, for all of Harry's efforts, unharmed. Except for a few cuts, one or two quite deep, and for the large chunk missing from one of their noses - they were still strong and undefeated.

Harry was standing in such a position that he could see the castle doors, and he saw that Dumbledore stood at the top of the cracked stone steps, that were slick with blood, with his wand drawn, and a cloud of purple magic growing around him. Harry didn't know what it was, but he saw both of the Nundu's glance quickly in the Headmaster's direction before turning back to Harry.

*They thought him the bigger threat, and time would show that these monsters were correct.*

They came at him again in unison, powerful legs pounding up and down on the gravel drive, green mist trailing out behind them. *They only produce the poison breath when they're not moving*, Harry thought, *and have to expel it when they are...*

Harry braced his back legs as the first one hit him head on. **BOOM!** The griffin was shook to his very being from the impact, but managed to hold his ground, pushing back against the Nundu.

It may have been over for Harry if the second one had made it to him, but Dumbledore's magic slowed it down. Working quickly, the Headmaster had cast a spell that forced a large chunk of earth and rock to thrust itself up out of the driveway, blocking the path of the second Nundu. This beast was travelling so fast that it ran straight into this newly created obstacle and it cracked down the middle, forcing the Nundu down onto its knees.

The rock exploded in a cloud of dust, and it only took the second Nundu a second to get back to his feet, but Harry got one over on the other beast because of it.

Just as the Nundu hit the rock wall, Harry was standing on his hind legs, wings flapping wildly and instinctively, and grappling with the other Nundu that also stood on its hind legs. Wind caught in his exposed wings and lifted him up several feet off the ground, streamlining over the imperfect bent wing was impossible, so he spiralled back down on top of the Nundu.

Biting and slashing as fast and as viciously as he could, Harry succeeded in ripping a large chunk of flesh from the scruff around the leopard-like neck. The Nundu screamed in fury and pain and flattened itself on the ground in an attempt to escape Harry's attack. Harry's weight came down on top of the beast though, and he continued to rip and tear at the creature.

He may have actually killed it then and there, but his expert sight caught the tendrils of green mist rising from its mouth and before it could reach him Harry attempted to turn and flee the sickness.

He did turn, removing his claws from the beast's back, and was instantly slashed viciously across the face from the extended paw of the other monster that was directly behind him. Harry stumbled to the side, shock and disbelief rolling through the human part of his mind. The left side of his face felt numb... and... and...

*The claw of the beast had popped his left eye.*

*Blind, he thought, almost calmly. It's blinded me... on the left side... shit... damn.*

Another upthrust of rock erupted beneath the Nundu that had just ruptured Harry's left eye, and carried it up several feet before the force threw it higher up into the air than the rock extended, and it came tumbling back down - hitting the ground with earth shattering weight and power.

Stumbling on his bleeding and bruised claws and paws, Harry was in shock and pain. The world spun in confused circles as he could only see out of his right eye, and he couldn't see the Nundus anywhere - nor would he have had the mind to do anything if he could.

Something heavy and powerful impacted painfully against his bleeding side and Harry was thrown to the ground, the air rushing from his lungs and he was unable to draw more with the Nundu on top of him. Suddenly the effort of remaining in his griffin form became too much, and Harry vaguely felt and saw himself changing back.

Just before he did, his good right eye saw more people than Dumbledore gathered on the steps of the castle. He saw James, Lily, Sirius, Sophia Tréla, and Dermas Trask - all standing alongside Dumbledore with their wands drawn, attempting to cast magic to help Harry. They were keeping the other Nundu from reaching him with a range of transfiguration and barrier spells.

Surprisingly, Harry felt the weight of the Nundu lessen as he reverted to his human form. The pain in his body increased tenfold, but the weight lessened. This was because the right paw of the Nundu was resting on his basilisk armour. His body area had shrunk, and he supposed it was lucky that the other paw wasn't on him - if it had been he would definitely know it.

Harry's face was a mess - marred with dust, sweat, and blood both dry and wet. Worst of all... the remains of his left eye were stuck to his cheek like a glob of jelly. He had no glasses and was down to only one eye. It didn't look good.

Dozens of long cuts stretched up and down his body, the most serious being the deep slash on his side which was now buried beneath the near-impervious basilisk armour, which was saving his life.

"HARRY!"

"COMMANDER, GET-"

*ROOOAAARRR!*

Harry cried out in pain as the Nundu on top of him spewed forth toxic green fumes from between its teeth. Unable to avoid it or stop himself, as his lungs were screaming out for air from when he had been winded a few seconds ago, Harry breathed in the sickness in long shuddering gasps.

He felt nothing, but his thoughts were becoming more coherent. He had been through so much over the years that even now he still had a hell of a lot of fight left in him.

*It can't end like this, he thought. It doesn't seem right... doesn't seem fair. I'm supposed to stand against Voldemort.*

The Nundu's paw was still pressing down upon him, and out of the corner of his only eye, in his peripheral vision, he saw the second one charging unhindered towards him, breaking past the obstacles in its path almost effortlessly.

*This just keeps getting better and better, he thought with a sardonic humour he didn't think he should have right now - not one he was dying in more than one way... blood loss, the Nundu's poisonous breath.*

Amazingly, Harry found that his arms still worked. There were several cuts up and down them and he had lost one or two fingernails, but they remained unbroken and he had full movement with them as the Nundu on top of him was attempting to scratch through his basilisk armour, tossing him back and forth several feet as it did this.

As if in response to his dire need, to his undeniable will to live and fight, blue fire erupted from his hands and encased his arms right up to the shoulder, just as he had practiced. When he had spent time learning the magic, he had always lost control if he tried to reach his shoulders with the blue electric-fire.

But now it seemed like second nature to him, that he had full command of all the powers of the universe surging through his fingertips. *If truth be told, that wasn't far from the truth.*

Bright blue light coursed through his entire body, highlighting the blood in his veins, making it appear faint blue. His arms were swirling and crackling with the power and they couldn't be seen beneath the blue fire. His right eye, his only eye, glowed as well, faintly compared to the bright blue light spilling out of the bloody and jelly encrusted hole that was his left eye socket.

The magical blue fire was, of course, harmless to Harry - not that he could be much more harmed than he was now - but he had seen what this power could do to the magical dummies he had used it upon, and the coherent part of his conscious mind felt a glimmer of hope and... *lust*.

*He wanted to kill these creatures that had hurt him so personally - effectively blinding him.*

Power exploded and the world shook. Dumbledore sensed it first and quickly pushed all of the others around him back into the castle, closing the doors behind him and bolstering them with every ounce of magic in his ancient body.

Harry saw them go and was thankful they were out of harm's way, as he couldn't stop this explosion of power even if he had tried to.

His arms erupted in pure blue lightning, long forks that shot forth and up in every direction. The ground around Harry was scarred deeply and burnt black as bolt after bolt of the fire-lightning reduced it to ash and dust. Acting purely on his survival instinct, Harry raised his arms and clasped both of his flaring hands onto the sides of the Nundu's face.

Not even a cry issued from the most powerful magical beast in the world, as its head was instantly disintegrated to nothing. Its body was thrown away by the lightning forks that shot from his arms, and the other Nundu, which had been approaching Harry fast, sensed his power and made an attempt to turn tail and run.

*Not a chance*, Harry thought, and directed his power towards the other beast.

Streaks of blue fire tore through its body, leaving grapefruit sized holes. It exploded in a ball of fire and blood and limbs rained down upon the immediate area in a fifty foot radius. The lightning also impacted against the castle - melting glass in the windows it hit, blowing up stone and leaving long, jagged sooty black scars on the outer wall.

The castle was strong though, and only a few bolts of the lightning exploded through shattered windows into mercifully empty corridors before Harry got it under control again.

The sense that he was in total control over this power was fading, and Harry knew he had to dissipate it - and fast. His understanding was slipping, the pain in his body worsening, the fire in his hands growing more dangerous. Hundreds of the bolts had hit the foliage and grass of the grounds, which were now alight.

Clenching his unseen fists, Harry crossed his arms across his chest and cried out,

*"ENOUGH!"*

The electric-fire flowing up and down his arms vanished in the blink of an eye - Harry's eye - and the last bolts hit whatever they hit, and then all was silent.

Breathing heavily and feeling the Nundu's sickness in his body, Harry somehow found the strength to pull himself to his feet for the last time in many weeks, and glanced out almost unseeingly at the grounds and one of the worlds around him.

He heard the castle doors being flung open, but the sound was so distant it may have been in another world for all he knew... or cared.

*I guess I won... well... I guess... I guess I can walk away one more time.*

Footsteps, rushing footsteps, behind him.... and a voice crying out in joy and concern, all at the same time.

"Harry... HARRY!" Lily Potter cried joyfully. "You did it, you-"

Lily stopped and then screamed as Harry turned to face her. *He's dead*, was her only thought, before she fell to her knees in fear and... and sorrow. *I've lost him again....*

Harry turned towards his mother, and his tired dull green eye connected with her tear stained ones. He managed a single step, and



a small, painful smile, before he screamed and blood mixed with saliva and vomit exploded from within his mouth. He was unconscious and near death before he hit the ground.

His final thought before the nightmares descended was,

*That is not dead which can eternal lie. Yet with strange aeons even Death may die.*

and,

*Do I look like someone who cares what God does?*

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## Chapter 17 - Stories Are What Make a Universe

To see a world in a grain of sand,  
And heaven in a wild flower:  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,  
And eternity in an hour.

~~William Blake

May  
115 days until the Autumnal Equinox

30<sup>th</sup>

"Jesus... this kid's a train wreck! What... what happened--is happening to him, Poppy?"

The infirmary in the Hogwart's hospital wing had been in a state of emergency and panic for the better part of the last four hours. Potion vials were smashed and broken underfoot on the floor, blood stained sheets were in piles around the bed of the patient, and a thin smoke hung in the air from the many cauldrons brewing various potions.

It had calmed down somewhat in the last half hour or so, and in that time a few expert magical medical practitioners had been called in from St. Mungo's hospital, and various nearby locations around Europe.

"Nundu poisoning," Madam Pomfrey said, waving her wand up and down the almost unrecognisable lump on the blood stained bed that was Harry Potter.

"Nundu poisoning did that!" Mark Denton exclaimed, pointing to the bloody hollow hole where Harry's left eye had been only a few hours ago.

Madam Pomfrey bit back a sharp insult at this remark. Denton was supposed to be the leading expert in the world in revolutionary healing potions. "No," she said through gritted teeth, repairing the skin around Harry's knuckles. "A Nundu claw did that!"

Denton fell silent and then quickly began to flip through a large folder of parchment he held between his arms. "Where is the Nundu now?" he asked after a moment, almost timidly.

"All over the castle grounds," a voice from behind Denton whispered. "And it was Nundus - plural."

Mark Denton turned to face James Potter, who was standing between the two nearest beds with his arm wrapped protectively around his wife, Lily. He nodded to the Potters, and continued to search through his lists upon lists of potion formulas.

"We haven't yet seen the symptoms of Nundu poisoning," another woman said, standing with her wand drawn and white magic glowing before her on the opposite side of Harry's bed to Madam Pomfrey.

Her name was Susannah Shaw, and she was the chief healer at St. Mungo's, and had healed Harry months ago after his painful heroism on Azkaban.

"It won't be long," Madam Pomfrey sighed. "By all rights I believe he should be dead now. Madam Shaw?"

Madam Shaw shook her head sadly. "I don't see how he is alive--no. I think there are other... *circumstances*... working to keep him alive. And I don't know what I mean when I say that."

Madam Pomfrey nodded. "Where is that heat coming from?" she then asked.

"It's pulsating from this odd scar upon his forehead," was the reply. "And now that I think about it my apprentice did mention something about that scar whilst the patient was in St. Mungo's... I'm not sure if the usual rules apply to this boy."

Quiet footsteps echoed on the stone behind all of them, and a voice said, "You are quite right there, Madam Shaw," Albus Dumbledore arrived, stroking his beard and observing Harry with pain-filled eyes. "But he is alive, and that is enough for now. Work your magic's, ladies--we need, Mr. Potter. Nothing is of more importance."

James felt Lily shift beneath his arms and he felt a stab of white hot anger himself directed towards Dumbledore. *Hasn't he done enough? Let him rest, old man!*

"Albus," began Madam Pomfrey. "We cannot stop the Nundu poisoning, only slow it down. Now that *will* kill him and I doubt that any magic can prevent that."

Dumbledore was slowly shaking his head. "A young healer is on her way here at my request from East Africa," he said calmly. "Her great-grandfather once treated me for a mild case of Nundu poisoning over one hundred years ago. I do not know to this day how he did it, but it can be done."

"You were cured of Nundu poisoning!" Mark Denton exclaimed. "What... how...?"

"A rather long tale, I'm afraid," Dumbledore sighed. "1892--and several wars ago."

Madam Pomfrey clicked her teeth with indecision. "He may not have more than a few hours, Albus, and that's just his other injuries. The Nundu breath will weaken his body beyond the point of recovery."

Dumbledore remained silent for a few thoughtful moments. "Can anything be done for his eye?" he finally asked, ignoring the elderly matron's implications.

She stared at him for a moment, sweat on her old brow and fatigue heavy in her eyes, and then turned to look at Harry. "I'm not sure... perhaps... I'll have to clean it out and hope there's something left of the eye to work on, but from what I can see here he may need a replacement--but that will have to wait, there are more serious problems to deal with first."

"Then we'll leave you to it," Dumbledore announced, glancing at James and Lily meaningfully.

"We're not leaving," Lily said, dried tear streaks on her cheeks and fresh ones in her eyes.

"I need to speak to both of you," the Headmaster said pointedly. "As sure as the phoenix flies...."

Both James and Lily understood that - an Order meeting. They got up to leave.

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*"Existence is a fickle thing; don't you think so, Harry?"*

*Lying in a field of pure black roses, a throbbing pain in his forehead that he associated with his scar, and a blinding ache in his left eye... which was there and fully functional.*

*"Where am I now?" he asked regretfully, tiredly, painfully. His voice seemed to float on waves through the air, echoing for miles, but above all it sounded tired... sad.*

*"Where are any of us?" a familiar voice replied, as Harry pulled himself up into a sitting position. "Just you and me now, partner--your body's dying."*

*Cold fear grasped Harry's heart and he felt for just a moment like a million Dementor's were all simultaneously sucking his soul from his body, ripping it away without remorse or mercy. It's the demon, he thought, the evil one, the Destroyer-*

*Laughter.*

*"That last one's not me, buddy," the deceptively human face said. "That handle belongs to little old you. Got a nice ring to it, don't you think? Harry Destroyer Potter! That one will be remembered long after your mortal body is pushing up white roses."*

*"Who... what are you, demon?" Harry asked, feeling dead where he sat. He could see no injuries on his body whatsoever, and he remembered the fight with the Nundus, but he could definitely feel the injuries.*

*"If you have to ask then you're not ready to know," the laughing, grinning-demon replied.*

*And then pushed a sharp silver blade entwined with black roses through Harry's chest.*

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*May  
114 days until the Autumnal Equinox*

31<sup>st</sup>

"It was in the *Prophet* this morning," Dermas Trask spat, throwing a rolled up newspaper onto the large circular table in the centre of the Room of Requirement - which twenty people were seated around. Harry's squad and the Order of the Phoenix, who were meeting for the second time in as many days.

"Then Voldemort will know Harry's out of it," Sirius growled. "How did this get out?"

"Probably one of the many Death Eater spawn that walk around this school," James Potter said. "My money's on that arrogant bastard Draco Malfoy."

"We were foolish to think we could hide something as big as this," Sophia Tréla said. "Two Nundus, of all things, attacked this school and the Commander destroyed them. Half the students in the Great Hall saw us carrying him up to the infirmary yesterday."

"Voldemort knows, so he'll make his move," Tonks whispered. "The Ministry... or here to finish off Harry?"

Severus Snape sneered. "Those beasts that attacked yesterday were part of the... force... within the Dark Lord's fortress. I'm not sure if he has any more, but we've not been summoned in over four weeks--so he may call us soon... I will be expected to report on Potter's condition."

James and Lily Potter visibly paled, and all eyes turned to Dumbledore who sat in the largest chair around the table, which denoted his stature. "Tell him the truth, Severus. Harry is near death

and poisoned by the Nundu breath. There is no known cure for that, save one, and that is a closely guarded secret. He will believe Potter will suffer a slow, inevitable death under the poison's sickness--and leave Hogwarts alone."

"As you wish, Headmaster," Snape nodded, and wrapped his arms across his chest in the folds of his black robes.

"There may still be a threat to this school, Albus Dumbledore," Art Nuan, one of Harry's team members, said.

"Mr Nuan?" the Headmaster waved his hand in the man's direction.

"The Commander has been incapacitated," Nuan explained, stroking his goatee beard. "The bounty hunters after his head will see this as a window of opportunity."

Dumbledore nodded with understanding. "Thank you, Mr. Nuan. That raises some previously unforeseen problems. Nymphadora, could you please inform the Minister this afternoon that three Aurors will be needed to guard the hospital wing--please tell him he may contact me in my office if there are any problems."

"Will do, Dumbledore," Tonks agreed, grimacing slightly at the mention of her first name.

"Excellent," Dumbledore nodded, and then fell silent as his eyes flickered across to every person in the room. When he spoke, his voice was quiet... low, and deadly serious. "We're on our again, friends. Our best chance at winning this war is now fighting for his life in a blood-stained bed on the other side of this castle. International aid is not forth coming, not that it ever would have been, and Voldemort's forces have grown to somewhere in the region of one thousand.

"The French are training and have provided two hundred and fifty good Aurors," he continued. "The Minister is in talks with Spain and Italy for a European alliance, but that could, and probably will, take months--if it happens at all. The heart of the resistance against Voldemort is in this very room right now. I want you all to do what you do best, give it your all, and never stop fighting."

*They never would.*

Across the castle, in the infirmary, Madam Pomfrey along with Madam Shaw was administering potions to Harry provided by the healing expert Mark Denton. Over night, large purple sores had appeared over all of Harry's body - a sure sign that the Nundu poison was killing him.

The large purple sores that were appearing all over his body were extremely sensitive to the touch, and the slightest knock burst them open and a bitter smelling puss oozed out, infecting once clear skin. If Harry didn't get treatment for them soon he would resemble a bloated purple sack before the day's end.

Thankfully, Madam Pomfrey had slowed the illness to a crawl as Dumbledore's specialist healer made her way across international boundaries towards Hogwarts. Something that had become increasingly difficult lately - keyed Portkeys were not working properly, and no explanation was forth coming.

It was also fortunate that the Nundu sickness was not contagious - it couldn't be passed from one human being to another, but that did nothing to help Harry now.

Lifting his closed right eyelid, Madam Pomfrey shone her wand into his pupil, looking for a reaction. She got none - but did see that the white of his eye had turned blood red. Never a good sign.

"These sores are bursting faster than I can clean and remove them, Poppy," Madam Shaw grumbled. "We need a better way of doing this."

"Just work as fast as you can, Susannah," Madam Pomfrey replied. "Denton is working on a potion to clear the sores alongside Severus - we just have to keep him alive a little longer."

Madam Shaw nodded. "You need to sleep though."

"I'll sleep when he's out of the woods. Until then I can manage."

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*"That hurt...." Harry sighed, standing now in the field of black roses under a lightning streaked sky - rubbing his chest where the blade of the demon had pierced him a moment or an eternity ago. There was no wound, but the demon remained.*

*"Well shucks, I apologise, Potter," the demon grinned and mocked him. "But there is far worse ahead of you. Oh golly, yes. Enough to drive the best of us... mad."*

*Black roses swayed in a wind that didn't exist, their roots buried in a ground that wasn't real - couldn't be real. There were hills in the distance, dark hills where nothing grew except stone. Across the field Harry could see a thin stretch of beach where black ocean waves crashed full of seaweed that was also roses.*

*Hearing that grinning voice mocking him, Harry's fear of the monster lessened and he jumped forward, throwing himself at the demon. He fell through the air and hit nothing but dirt. The demon had disappeared in the time between the time between milliseconds.*

*"Bang! You're dead," the demon said from behind him and Harry stood back up, turning to face it. It held its hand out in the imitation of a Muggle gun. "Too slow on the draw, partner."*

*Harry frowned and took a few steps forward, but he felt something was wrong. Looking down at his chest he saw his white polo shirt slowly turning crimson, from a small hole in his chest that had at first gone unnoticed.*

*Harry looked back up at the demon. It was still smiling as it pretended to blow the smoke away from the barrel of the 'gun' it had made out of its fingers and slip it back into an invisible holster on its belt buckle.*

*"My rules in this world, Harry. Soon my rules in all worlds - if there are any left in a few short months."*

*Harry stumbled and fell, the pain in his chest immense. "Am I dreaming?" he asked, not expecting an answer. It gave one.*

*"We're all dreaming - some of us deeper than others, and none deeper than you. You'll die a thousand deaths before we're through.... Hey! That rhymes. I'm a poet and I did not know it... but I guess this is no time to rhyme. Ha ha!"*

And fade to black, *Harry thought.*

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*June 1<sup>st</sup>*

*113 days until the Autumnal Equinox*

At around two in the afternoon on this day, a small dark-skinned witch walked into the infirmary at Hogwarts, hooded and cloaked with a small trunk levitated before her. Albus Dumbledore was at her side conversing quietly in a language neither Madams Pomfrey nor Shaw could understand.

This witch was a healer from East Africa and as soon as they reached the bed Harry lay in the healer pulled back her hood to reveal flowing dark hair that fell all the way down to her waist. Brown eyes examined Harry professionally and without flinching, even though he was now almost completely covered in purple sores from head to toe.

Mark Denton's potion had only kept the disease from spreading faster than it could have done, by tripling Harry's antibodies. They were all good and dead and overrun now and another potion would do nothing.

"Healer?" Dumbledore asked questioningly, in a language that wasn't his own.

The healer shook her head, and put a soft hand on Harry's bare and purple blotchy chest. He was barely breathing. Working quickly and silently, the woman opened her trunk and began to crush small roots with a pestle and mortar. She reached over to Harry and squeezed one of the larger growths on his chest, which promptly popped and began to ooze a clear liquid.

Without hesitation, she scraped up this puss and mixed it in with the crushed roots and then added a small amount of amber coloured liquid from a flask in her trunk. Mixing it carefully, the solution began to take on the consistency of a fine, muddy paste. Dumbledore, and both matron's, remained silent and thoughtful during this process, knowing Harry's only hope lay with this healer.

With her delicate yet skilled fingers, the healer rubbed the paste onto Harry's upper lip and around his mouth and nose. The purple blotches there that were cutting off most of his ability to draw breath began to visibly shrink and then disappear entirely.

Madam Pomfrey gasped. She and Madam Shaw had been unable to remove any of the sores over the last fifteen hours - they seemed resistant to magic, but this paste worked miracles.

There was a small smile on the healer's lips and she turned to Dumbledore with a glint of hope in her eyes and said words that only the Headmaster understood. She and Dumbledore conversed for a few minutes, and then he turned to Madam Pomfrey.

"There is little hope," he said. "The healer will now work on removing the toxin from his system - it may take many weeks. Both of you will have to be by her side as she works to heal any other wounds that may develop."

"How is this done, Albus?" Madam Pomfrey was afraid to ask.

Dumbledore smiled sadly. "Not through magic," he said. "The cure will only respond to a strong will to live. Only if Harry wants to come back will he have the chance to. If that will wavers even once before the poison is out of his system, we'll lose him."

Madam Pomfrey nodded, although she only just grasped what Dumbledore had said. When she looked back at the silent African healer, the young witch was already crushing more ingredients in her small wooden bowl.

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*June 4<sup>th</sup>*

110 days until the Autumnal Equinox

## **DEATH EATERS DESTROY DIAGON ALLEY - MINISTRY CAUGHT OFF GUARD**

*Special Correspondent Felice Garnet*

Clouds have gathered before the brief spell of sunlight our world was given for two short months. Wizarding Britain's most well-known cornerstone, the shopping district Diagon Alley, lies in ruin and flames this morning after an attack last night by You-Know-Who and his Death Eater army.

Hundreds lie dead on the once proud street and fire rages across and around the surrounding area in London. Muggle emergency services have been called in to quell the blaze, as nothing magical could survive the intense heat of the flames.

This attack, in which forty Aurors have been killed, brings about the renewed beginning of the Dark War - a war we all secretly hoped was finished forever. It was not to be. He Who Must Not Be Named has not been stopped in his war to gain power, and now it seems no one can stop him.

Harry Potter, a boy who became famous overnight for duelling the Dark Lord and forcing him to retreat, lies dying in a hospital bed in the Hogwarts infirmary - severe amounts of Nundu poison coursing through his veins.

The poison will undoubtedly claim Potter's life soon and with his death our thread of hope will be cut, and circumstances could return to the dark way they were as early as February this year.

The Ministry lost one fifteenth of its armed forces last night in the battle for Diagon Alley, which was led by You-Know-Who himself. This is the

*first time in over two months that the Dark Lord has been seen.*

*With the only threat to his taking power dying slowly at Hogwarts, it may only be a matter of time before You-Know-Who turns his attention towards the Ministry of Magic itself. Such a blow would undoubtedly lose us this war - and that now is definitely a reality.*

*What once looked so hopeful and promising is now wilting like an old rose. Our hope blowing out like a candle in the wind. No time, no hero, no chance. Pray, Wizarding Britain, it may be all we have left.*

Dermas Trask had seen a lot of terrible things in his lifetime. He grew up relatively alone in Ireland with his father, who taught him mastery over the blade - and he had seen a lot of terrible things.

He was a teenager during World War II when Britain, when Albus Dumbledore, stood against Grindelwald. He had seen his fair share of violence then. Relatively peaceful for a time after that, but then there was Voldemort. Dermas had been in the Order of the Phoenix, alongside Dumbledore, and he had seen what the Death Eaters could do first hand.

He had seen what Voldemort could do first hand as well - when the Dark Lord had killed his fiancé years ago right in front of him. He had seen attack after dark attack until he had finally fled out onto the collection of islands on the west coast of Scotland.

Dermas had seen humanity at its worst, briefly at its best, and at all the shades in between. He had seen amazing acts done with magic, with thought, and even with good old fashioned human intelligence.

*Shit, he thought, I've even seen a kid fight a pair of Nundu's and win!*

But the attack on Diagon Alley was one of the worst things he would ever see, and that was because he arrived when it was too late to make a difference, as the shops were burning down around him and the rest of the Order of the Phoenix. One thought was stuck to his

mind for the rest of his life, and that was it hadn't been a battle in Diagon Alley - it had been a slaughter.

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*Harry stood up once again in the field of black roses, wherever or whatever it was, and wasn't very surprised to find that the pain in his chest was gone and that there was no bullet wound.*

*He thought for a moment that he might be alone, but then sensed the dark presence behind him and turned fast, palms glow-*

*"Magic don't work here, boy," the demon drawled, rolling a galleon down his knuckles.*

*Harry found to his surprise and shock that the beast was right. He could feel his magic bubbling away inside of him, but it was unreachable - had nothing to act with in this world. Useless....*

*"My scar hurts...." he managed, his own voice sounding distant and drowned out by a deep throbbing in the air.*

*"Ah yes," the demon cried. "That amazing scar. The centre of it all - the cause of, and solution to, all of our problems."*

*"What do you-?"*

*"No, no, no, no, NO!" the demon grinned, but it felt like a snarl. "Some boundaries even you can't cross, Harry. Leave it well enough alone and you may take another breath."*

*Grimacing in pain, pain felt from the wounds his body had sustained, Harry tried to smile. "If you can kill me you would have done so already."*

*The demon's grin faltered just a bit - blink and you would have missed it, folks - but then his face rearranged itself into that arrogant, confident smirk. "Now that--was being quick on the draw, Potter. You didn't shoot me clean, winged me a bit... and that is disturbing."*

*Harry felt the power of the black roses that stretched for miles in every direction - felt their evil - and suppressed a shudder.*

*"What do I call you?" he eventually asked, bracing himself for another stab wound in the chest.*

*"Ah! Now that is a different question from 'what are you'... well done, Harry. I'll answer that one."*

*Time stretched on around them. Black roses grew and then wilted to die in mere seconds. The mountains in the distance were eroded away to nothing and the clouds rolled across the sky in an endless stream of thick storms.*

*"While we're young," Harry coughed, rubbing his scar and shivering as the world changed dramatically around him.*

*"I'm not sure where to begin," the demon said, honestly perplexed. "I guess... I guess I'm a bit of everything."*

*"What's your name?" Harry asked, biting back the fear he felt. All at once wanting to know, and dreading the answer.*

*The demon laughed. "My name? MY NAME? Well... Potter. I've gone by many names, handles if you like, through many different stories over the aeons - each one striking fear into the hearts of thousands, of hundreds of thousands.... even, of billions."*

*"...what...?"*

*"Flagg, the Walkin' Dude, was once my name - perhaps will be again in those particular worlds - billions of stories are what make the universes, Harry, remember that... even if you remember nothing else. Billions, trillions of chapters in one long book that contains the very Meaning of everything. One would go mad with even a glimpse of that final, ultimate story."*

*Harry gasped at the implication, but remained strong. "Your name?"*

*The demon smiled. "Of course, I apologise, Harry. Got meself a little sidetracked then," it rolled its eyes in a 'what are you gonna do' kind*

*of manner. "Flagg more than once. Saruman in another world a very long time ago. Killian in a world with few heroes that is bereft of magic. Kerrigor a few millennia ago. Galbatorix I was, the Slayer."*

*"My God..." Harry breathed, feeling as if he had been punched hard with the mention of each new and terrible name.*

*"Yes," the creature of many names laughed. "Your God! I've lived through tales that your world, and many others like it, considers mere fiction. My list of names stretches back to the Beginning, and now it looks like my last name may be in this story, in the End."*

*"What... what does that mean?" Harry barely managed.*

*"Patience, Harry, patience is something you'll learn," it snapped, its grin never faltering. "Voldemort I'm not, but I admire his work. The Dark One I could have been but if I ever was I've forgotten. 'What was, what will be, and what is, may yet fall under the Shadow' is what they used to say in that world. Sephiroth upon a time, and Sin from that string of worlds. The Witchking, Warlock Lord, Marlor, Smith, Judas, Liquid, Legion - I could go on for centuries!"*

*"You're Evil," Harry stated. "That's your true name."*

*The demon fell silent and his unblinking eyes fixed Harry's with a stare that could freeze blood. "Pleased to meet you, Harry Potter. You can call me Allarius... and as Richard Fannin--another one of my many handles--once said; care to shake the hand that shook the world?"*

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*June 15<sup>th</sup>*

*99 days until the Autumnal Equinox*

Thomas Fright was dead - KIA - another name on the long list of casualties this war had endured.

Voldemort and his Death Eaters had been attacking ferociously over the last fortnight, striking many Wizarding/Muggle villages up and



down the United Kingdom, and even in France. The Ministry was in a state of constant alert, two hundred Aurors guarding it at all time. No attempt had been made against the Ministry yet, but one had been made on Bartemius Crouch's life - he had escaped the assault with a fractured collar bone.

But there was another attack, in the village of Hogsmeade, in which Thomas Fright had been gathering information for both Harry's squad and the Order of the Phoenix. He had stumbled on to a secret Death Eater meeting in the Three Broomsticks - in one of the upstairs rooms - and had been taken down by a stray Killing Curse.

Fright had taken four Death Eaters with him, and his body was cremated as per his last will and testament.

Harry was completely unaware, trapped as he was in sickness and nightmares - his soul wading in and out of the space between all worlds. His body was still in a poor state, but it was getting better... not quickly, and time was something this world did not have in abundance.

The healer from Africa had been working for eighteen hours a day on Harry's poisoned body, rubbing a special salve into his skin and administering an amber coloured liquid every ten minutes. Madam Pomfrey, for the first few days saw no noticeable improvement in Harry's condition - but slowly the large purple sores and welts that covered his body faded to a greyish colour and then began to disappear entirely.

Once the swelling in his face had gone down she had put a black eye patch over the mushy hole in his head, and did think she may be able to repair the damage, perhaps leaving one or two marks on and around the eye, but fixed nonetheless. There was no time to do it now though. Occasionally Harry's skin would rupture, an effect of the Nundu breath, just split open and begin to bleed. Madam Pomfrey had to be quick to heal these ruptures.

So slowly, *too slowly*, Harry was getting better as the world around them fell quickly. Madam Pomfrey knew he was needed, but they could do nothing more than what they had been doing. This was, however slow it worked, the only cure to a Nundu's breath.

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*"We're going to be great enemies, you and I!" Allarius smiled, as Harry woke up again--his head throbbing viciously.*

*"Where'd I go just now?" he croaked.*

*Allarius chuckled, to Harry it sounded like a saw blade on metal. "You fell back into the mortal world, partner. Back into that diseased husk of flesh you call a body."*

*Harry coughed up blood, feeling weak and tired. "Why do you keep... keep calling me back here?"*

*Allarius hunched down in front of him, winking as he did. "Figured that out as well, didja? Well... minds like yours always do in the end."*

*"WHY?" Harry roared, and then fell into a coughing fit - blood and spit coating his hand as he attempted to stifle it.*

*"For many reasons, World Wanderer ... do you like that name? Made it up meself... Anyway, as I was saying. You intrigue me, Potter. I was called to these worlds because of the connection you share with the Dark Lord--you see, it's eating away at the magic of existence. This connection cannot be broken, and it's... its burning a hole through the fabric that separates one world from another, to reach you... if that makes any sense...?"*

*Harry shuddered and was almost sick. "It makes too much sense. I have to-"*

*Allarius laughed. "What? Stop it? You're dead, Harry. You've already lost before you even knew the game. Tough shit, better luck next ti-oh... there won't be a next time. How amazingly wonderful!"*

*"I don't believe that," Harry said unwaveringly, pulling himself to his feet.*

*"Believe it or not, that doesn't matter, it'll still kill ya!" Allarius laughed and pulled one of the black roses out of the ground. "You see this?" it asked.*

*Harry nodded. "A black rose."*

*Allarius looked offended. "So much more, Potter, so much more. This is a physical manifestation of the evil in your curse scar link - on Voldemort's end... and perhaps a touch on yours, hmm? - these are what are tearing down the Boundary, polluting the Stream, and toppling worlds."*

*"Toppling worlds?"*

*"Soon all worlds along your level of existence will begin to feel the consequences as the magic, the glue, that holds them all together is broken. It is inevitable, and it was all done because of... love... your love. It has done more than hate and evil ever could. Take a bow, Harry. You've succeeded where evil has failed for all of time."*

*Ginny, Harry thought. My sacrifice into the Stream to save her and Hogwarts... knowing what I know now and, oh God, it is terrible, I would have still done it.*

*"What consequences?" he asked Allarius.*

*Allarius flashed its familiar grin. "Destruction... floods, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions. Saddle up, pup, it's a special on Armageddon - buy one get one free."*

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*June 27<sup>th</sup>*

*88 days until the Autumnal Equinox*

Gerald King had lived his entire life on the southern coast of South Australia - just twenty miles west of the road that led to the capital city of that state, Adelaide. Sixty seven years of age, Gerald had been married twice and had three kids currently building themselves great

careers in various industries around the country. Gerald had provided well for his family - good education was most important.

On this particular June day, there was nothing - no warning, no sixth sense - to warn the population off this twenty mile stretch of coast road, somewhere in the vicinity of 10,000, that today would be their last upon the earth.

For the first noticeable time ever, as Gerald King drove his 4WD down the dirt track towards his cattle ranch, roughly two miles from the CBD of this small seaside community, the ground shook and all hell broke loose.

Gerald's truck was turned on its head and he was crushed between the seat and the dashboard - feeling no pain. A deafening crashing sound rumbled in his ears - so loud that his eardrums began to bleed. Gerald's only thought was, and he had never been a religious man before this, that God himself had pounded his fist nearby upon the flat ground.

In the space of two minutes, on the morning of June 27<sup>th</sup>, the first earthquake of such magnitude in recorded history broke on the Australian seaside community, and inland for several hundred miles - killing near one hundred thousand.

Gerald King would be the only survivor in a fifty mile radius from where his truck rolled on the road - to be found by emergency services some fifteen hours later.

About a month later, as he was living with his daughter over east in the city of Sydney, spending his time researching earthquakes, and some of the other unnatural phenomenon that was battering the earth lately - Gerald would learn it was naturally impossible for an earthquake of such magnitude to move on Southern Australia, and that no known force could create one - it was no where near the edge of the earth's tectonic plates.

*Bloody weapons testing*, Gerald would say to the end of his days. *Americans probably - first rule: deny everything! I tell you, dark days ahead... dark days.* Gerald was right in that final respect.

*July 1<sup>st</sup>*

*85 days until the Autumnal Equinox*

Just four days after one hundred thousand people were killed in Southern Australia, another quake of awesome power destroyed everything in a long three hundred mile line in North America. Thankfully this was mostly desert and mountain ranges, but several hundred people lost their lives anyway, and the disasters didn't stop there.

*July 15<sup>th</sup>*

*70 days until the Autumnal Equinox*

Munich, Germany.

Hurricanes of such power that they could destroy all traces of life and leave just upturned dirt pounded the small city, with winds seemingly coming out of nowhere. The previous day the weather reports forecast a sunny day with a moderate to light afternoon breeze.

*If this was a moderate to light breeze, then a heavy breeze would herald the end.*

The city and a lot of the surrounding countryside was razed to the ground by a force of nature that was no longer in balance with the laws of the universe. Elements mixed and clashed with those of other worlds through holes in the fabric, the curtain, that usually kept every world separate and magic in balance - no longer.

*July 17<sup>th</sup> - July 19<sup>th</sup>*

*66 days until the Autumnal Equinox.*

Floods washed over the coasts of Spain from unexplained rising sea levels.

Volcanic eruptions that destroyed one of the Hawaiian Islands.

In the north of Scotland the temperature dropped unexpectedly to minus 49 Celsius - freezing hundreds who had not expected it, and were out in the brief summer sun they were given during that time of the year.

*Special on Armageddon, folks. Free, can only be used once - but you get your money's worth.*

*All of these disasters were mirrored along every other world in existence. The End was showing itself, and there was redemption for none as long as the saviour was gone.*

*Hey, that rhymes.*

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*July 20<sup>th</sup>*

*65 days until the Autumnal Equinox.*

Harry Potter lay almost completely naked in the Hogwart's hospital wing - where he had lain for the past seven weeks, slowly healing. Discarded potion ingredients and dozens of potion vials littered the floor around his bed and the occupant upon it.

The healer from East Africa was still there, still working her medicines on this boy - who now resembled the whole and complete self he had done before the Nundu attack. Pale and fragile, all of the purple sores had faded away, leaving what looked like a very frightened and tired boy in their place.

Madam Pomfrey wouldn't have believed it eight weeks ago - wouldn't have bet a single galleon on the odds that he would recover, except perhaps against him - and yet here he was. The healer had told Dumbledore he could wake up at any minute, as the final traces of the magical poison dissipated from his body.

The only people in the castle were James, Lily, Michael, and Melissa Potter, along with Madam Pomfrey, the African Healer, Dumbledore, and a handful of Order members and Harry's squad members. The

rest of the castle's usual residents had been sent home for the summer at the end of the school year a month ago.

"You healed his eye," Lily Potter noted, as she entered the infirmary on the morning of July 20<sup>th</sup>.

"I did as good a job as I could," Madam Pomfrey smiled tiredly. "It'll work, but I'm afraid it won't be the same dazzling emerald green that it was. It's a pale green now--his right eye is going to stand out when compared next to it."

"Under the circumstances that's more than I'd hoped for," Lily whispered, looking like death warmed up herself. "Where's the healer?"

"With Dumbledore," Pomfrey replied. "Trying to secure a Portkey back to Africa. You know with all this unnatural weather we've been having lately it's almost impossible to key the Portkeys accurately."

Lily nodded - she understood. The world was going to hell in a handcart, and she felt it was all to do with Harry, just Harry. "I would've liked to have thanked her," she said absently.

"You know she barely said two words the whole time she was here, and those were to Dumbledore."

Lily wasn't listening; she was gazing at the small body in the bed that was her son with respect and confusion. "Where do you think he's been these past seven weeks?" Lily whispered. "I only know he's alive because his chest is rising and falling - but where has he been, what's he been thinking. Does he... does he know that we're losing the war again?"

"I think those questions will be answered soon enough," Madam Pomfrey said. "He's going to wake up soon - very soon."

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?

*"Why is it getting harder and harder to pull you into this world, Potter?" Allarius asked, suspicion and anger laced into his voice.*

*"Maybe you're losing your touch," Harry whispered, his voice a dry croak and his body - his soul - weak and ruined.*

*"Or maybe you're more powerful than I thought...."*

*Harry managed a small, mad smile that rivalled Allarius'. "That's the mistake every one of my enemies has made. They always underestimate me."*

*Allarius laughed, his grin growing. "Existence is cruel, Harry... but I didn't invent it."*

*Harry stood up for what would be the final time in the field of black roses, glancing warily at the demon. "No, you're just here to make sure it's destroyed."*

*Allarius, still smiling, crossed his hands before him. "What can I say to that? Slap the cuffs on, Harry. Guilty as charged. Looks like the gallows for ol' Allarius."*

*"Why?" Harry asked with a strain.*

*"Well..." Allarius clicked his heels together and spun his cloak around in a billowing cloud. "I guess I just get a kick out of hearing a billion voices screaming in unison."*

*Anger - unexpected and cold - surged through Harry's body, which was feeling better these days, something he hadn't told Allarius and not something the demon had mentioned. Moving so fast his hand blurred, Harry reached down and pulled the nearest black rose out of the ground, cutting his hand open but ignoring the pain.*

*"What-?"*

*Dirt fell away from the roots of the plant and Harry held it out before him like a sword. "SEE THIS, DEMON!" he bellowed, and was more than a little surprised when Allarius fought against looking at it.*



*"Potter, you-"*

*"AH!" cried Harry, and felt a familiar surge of power break through his palms and race up the stem of the rose. There was a dazzling flash of light and Harry was no longer holding a black rose, but a white one.*

*Allarius screamed.*

*One boy.*

*One demon.*

*And one hope in the form of a white rose.*

*Destiny had nothing to do with this one - it was all Harry's show now.*

*Stepping forward, closing the gap between himself and the captivated demon, Harry thrust the pure white rose forward, like a blade, and cut through Allarius' chest.*

*Shock... and a measure of fear crossed Allarius' usually calculated face. He gazed up at Harry as if seeing him for the first time - and seeing his equal. "Good draw, partner," he said, black blood falling from the corner of his human mouth.*

*There was a large whooshing sound and Harry turned to see a large tear in the air - much like the one that led to the Stream - that was flooded with white light. This wasn't a way home though, no. It was just another marker on the road home.*

*Within this tear, this portal, Harry could see himself, lying with his left hand on his chest in what looked like the Hogwart's hospital wing. He knew what needed to be done. Harry turned back to the creature with many names, Allarius for now, and saw that it was trying to pull the white rose from its chest.*

*"You might want to get that looked at," Harry said, grinning sadistically, stepping back slowly towards the portal back to one of the mortal worlds.*

(But there is far worse ahead of you. Oh golly, yes. Enough to drive the best of us... mad.)

*"I'll be seeing you again," Allarius snarled, with no sign of that evil grin upon his face. "You'll have to cross over into your own world soon, and when you do I'll meet you halfway--in the space between everything. There you'll die, there you'll burn!"*

*Harry was still grinning like a madman as he disappeared in a flash of dazzling white light.*

*Allarius screamed in pain and untold fury and the black roses around him were flattened into the earth.*

\*\*\*\*

*July 21<sup>st</sup>*

*64 days until the Autumnal Equinox*

Aurors were awake and asleep in twelve hour intervals each. The war against Voldemort and the Death Eaters had been raging particularly hard over the last two weeks, and hundreds had died on both sides.

Auror numbers were slightly less than that of the Death Eaters, and that was simply because there was no one to stand against Voldemort - who had killed fifteen Aurors himself in the last encounter in Southern England. All the latest reports from the Ministry were not encouraging, and the *Prophet* was running at least two pages of obituaries every day.

Dumbledore had tried to duel the Dark Lord, but his age kept him down. Even after their last encounter where Dumbledore had nearly died, the old Headmaster had managed to force the Dark Lord into retreat, for a time.

Four hundred - or thereabouts - was the educated guess to the remainder of the Death Eater force. British and French Aurors, seven hundred at the beginning of June, were now dwindled to only two hundred. The morale of the Auror forces had something to do with

that - they didn't believe they could win. Not against Voldemort and with Harry Potter dead.

*Yes, dead.*

He hadn't been seen in over two months by anyone outside of Hogwarts - and public belief was that he had died of his wounds at the end of May.

*It also didn't help matters that the very world seemed to be tearing itself apart.*

Disaster upon devastating disaster seemed to be claiming the earth on a daily basis. None of these so called 'natural' disasters, conformed to long held truths about the nature of the planet. Severe earthquakes in Australia, temperature drops of dozens of degrees at ground level in a matter of seconds, large pockets of gaseous steam surging up out of the earth--boiling sea water and scorching land.

*And that was the least of it.*

Fear of the unknown and a respect for the awesome power of nature and the forces that wielded it was prominent in the minds of billions in this world. Time would tell what happened - who the players were, and whether the board would collapse in on itself before the game was over - as it soon would be.

Muggles and Magical folk alike were... terrified... and many saw this as the coming of the End - that the apocalypse was upon them and nothing could be done to stop it.

It was around this time that existence's only hope opened his eyes in the hospital wing of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.....

Harry James Potter, a boy ruled by prophecy, fate, destiny, and what he made on his own, opened his eyes

*(eyes - plural)*

and at first saw nothing but bright white light. His body ached as if he hadn't moved in weeks, months, years... aeons. But he remembered

everything, even that last look of pure hate that had been stuck to the demon's face at the very end there.

*Allarius*, he thought, coughing - the first sound his body had made in over seven weeks - *I'll be seeing you again.*

Slowly, but surely, he began to feel all the aches in his body as one long *crack* raced up his spine and arms and legs as he moved a few inches. That small effort stole all the strength from him, and he couldn't keep his eyes open any longer.

*My eyes*, he thought. *I can use both of them.*

"Harry...?"

*What?*

"Harry?"

*Yes, I'm Harry. Who are you?*

"His eyes opened - just for a second."

*They did, both of them. I have two eyes.*

"Where's Dumbledore? What! St. Mungo's."

To Harry, the voices sounded like silent whispers echoing down a long and empty tunnel. He fell asleep and awoke three hours later.

"I'm sorry, James," someone said. "We could not wait any longer. To do so would mean the end of us all, and that includes Michael and Melissa. Harry is strong... he can take this."

"He shouldn't have to!" Lily Potter screamed, looking like she was ready to strike the ancient Headmaster, whose arm was in a sling. "He needs time to heal properly. You can't just fill him full of potions and call it healed!"

Harry felt a burning sensation in the back of his throat that he associated with nutrient potions, and when he opened his eyes this

time he found it easy to do, and felt revitalised beyond anything he had been over the last two months.

"Harry..." Lily breathed.

"Welcome back, Mr. Potter," Dumbledore said calmly, but there was a band of sweat across his forehead, above which lay a bloodied bandage.

"It's good to be back," Harry said, marvelling at the effects of magical potion. He never could have managed those words without their aid. "How bad is it?"

"Bad," Dermas Trask said from the other side of the bed, and Harry pulled himself up into a sitting position. His body was actually in a fairly good condition - all of his wounds had long since healed from the Nundu fight. Any other aches and pains he might be feeling were numbed by the potions.

"How bad is bad?" he asked.

"Since you were poisoned... five hundred Aurors have been killed, four hundred Death Eaters are at large, half of the Wizarding communities from here to Spain are in flames, Dementors are ravishing Muggle Britain, and Voldemort can't be stopped." Dermas fell silent after that.

"And that's not to mention all the natural disasters that have-" Madam Pomfrey began, but Harry waved her off.

"I know about that," he said, and didn't elaborate any further. *He just knew, and was perhaps the only one in this world who knew why it was happening.*

"Harry..." James Potter began, but then thought better of it.

Harry's pale and emerald eyes flashed as his gaze connected with his fathers. "I know what's been happening, and I know why... I'm sorry to say I did this, but I'll fix it... and live with it no matter what happens. Now what's the move?"

Lily gasped. "Harry," she whispered. "You need to rest. Nundu poisoning is nothing you can just walk away from. A week more bed rest at least."

Harry was shaking his head before she was finished, and now he looked at Dumbledore. "Just give me the potions that'll keep me on my feet, and we'll head to the Ministry now, Headmaster."

Swinging his legs off the edge of the bed, Harry pulled himself to his feet - swaying only slightly as the previous round of potions kept him conscious. He was already taking back control after being out of it for two months - as if time meant anything.

"Dermas, assemble the team and meet me at the Ministry. Dumbledore, am I right in thinking Voldemort believes me dead?"

Dumbledore nodded and was about to speak, but Dermas Trask did first. "Harry... Thomas Fright is dead."

That one stopped Harry for a few moments, but then his eyes glazed over emotionlessly. "Regrettable," he managed. "Nevertheless... the Ministry in full battle gear within the hour. Where are my clothes and armour?"

"They're... in our quarters," Lily whispered sadly, not recognising the boy - the man - before her anymore. Anything of her Harry that had been in there had been killed by this one, the real one. "I'll go get them."

Harry nodded and twisted his neck sharply causing it to crack. "I'll jump in the shower while you're gone then."

Seven minutes later Harry stepped out from under the warm spray of the showers in the hospital wing. He dried himself off quickly and wrapped the towel around his waist. As he did so, he chanced a look in the mirror across the way and then took a deep breath, walking over to it.

*Let's see the damage then....* he thought, all of his other thoughts on the equinox.

Reaching the mirror, Harry looked down at his chest first - making sure to avoid seeing his face for now - and saw that he had a new scar running up the left side of his chest. Just a thin pale band against the other pale, sick looking skin there.

*Nundu slash*, he remembered, feeling a sharp stab of pain there as he did. Shaking his head, he moved on - and slowly raised his head to meet his own eyes.

*My left eye looks like it belongs to a ghost*, was his first thought - but he was just thankful it was still there. His cheeks were sunk and his eyes hollow, his hair clung to his head and his vision swayed in and out slightly as he focused on himself. *I should be resting*, he told himself. *No time*.

Looking into his eyes, Harry ran his right hand across the small, barely noticeable scar underneath his repaired eye. It felt rough and... and scarred. It felt like what it was. His once emerald green eye, so much like his mother's, now held only the slightest hint of pale green. His right eye stood out profoundly against it.

*Not much to look at, Potter*, he thought - and the voice in his head sounded eerily like Allarius. *But you've still got your health... ha ha!*

There was a knock on the door and Dumbledore brought in his clothes and armour along with a few vials of energy sustaining potion.

*Show time*.

To say the Ministry was one of the last few standing symbols of the Light in Britain would be true, to say the Aurors that guarded it were tired and weak would be true, to say the prisoner in one of the far cells was soon to be freed would be true, and to say that the last thing anyone that day expected to see was Harry Potter walking through the Atrium would definitely be true.

The government was still running - barely - and the Atrium was not as busy as it normally would have been, and had more than enough Aurors in it as well. Yet all of them ceased to move as Albus Dumbledore appeared alongside Harry Potter (who looked dead on his feet) on the Apparation point.

Their footsteps echoing loudly on the stone of the floor, Harry and Dumbledore - both battle wearied warriors of incredible stature - made their way over to the golden grille of the elevator, and up to the Minister of Magic's office.

Standing - leaning - against one of the panelled walls in the lift, Harry swallowed another potion and cast the vial aside thoughtlessly, wiping away the sweat on his brow. He was tired, needed rest and a time to readjust to being among the living again, but that potion would keep him going a while longer now.

"I'm sorry, Harry. You need to rest," Dumbledore said, placing a hand on Harry's shoulder.

Harry shrugged it off - thinking of all the problems that lay siege to him. Least of all the Voldemort of this world. "No time," he said with his eyes closed. "Never enough time."

Few paper messages flew overhead and that was a sure sign that the Ministry was falling apart, if nothing else was. Dumbledore pondered these thoughts and many others for a few moments, wondering what was going to happen to their world and what was already happening to it. He felt certain the answers lay in the broken mind standing only two feet away.

Looking back up at Harry, Dumbledore saw he was waving his hand back and forth in front of his face - staring at it as if he had never seen it before.

"My glasses...." he said. "I... never noticed. I don't need them--my sight's fine!?"

Dumbledore managed a small, tight smile that could no longer reach his eyes. "You have Madam Pomfrey to thank for that. Intensive reconstruction for several hours a day over the last four weeks. That magic must have also cured your need for glasses."

Harry was silent for a moment, glancing at the buttons on the panel by the door. He could read them clearly from where he was, and that was good, wasn't it? He coughed to clear his throat and stood steady until a wave of fatigue and dizziness passed.



"They were a liability," he finally said, and then no more.

The golden grille slid back on the floor to the Minister's office and Harry first saw people he hadn't in seven weeks. Dermal Trask, Sophia Tréla, Grace Arnair, Sirius Black, Art Nuan, and Nymphadora Tonks - all of them dressed in their basilisk armour, complete with the engraved white rose.

"Hello," Harry said, using one hand to steady himself against the wall. "I see... I see everyone's here."

There were a few nods, none of them mentioning the absence of Thomas Fright. Harry saw that most of their eyes widened at their first sight of him. He decided it was either the way he looked, or the fact that none of them had expected to see him upright again.

"You all look like you've seen a ghost!" he said, smiling. None of them smiled back.

"Everything's too serious now for jokes, Harry," Sophia said tiredly, her French accent thick.

Harry saw that there was a long, fresh cut reaching down from her left ear to her jaw. He flicked his healed eyes up to hers. "Sometimes you can only joke about these things. I know it help keeps me sane.... but you're right. Let's get on with it, shall we. Where's the Minister?"

It wasn't the reunion any of them had expected, least of all Harry - who felt as if he had seen all of them only a day or two ago, or what could have been up to a thousand years.

*Existence is a fickle thing*, he thought as he followed Trask down the corridor. *But at least now I know why.*

Gingerly, Harry pushed his fingers underneath his fringe and felt his infamous scar. There was a cold tingle of power, and nothing more. It was strange to think that this seemingly insignificant *mark* on his face was bringing down existence at its boundaries.

*Bloody Voldemort*, he thought, and then amended that to, *Voldemort's!*

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All the markers had been called in now. War was coming to a head on two fronts. Harry had survived, against all odds and doubts, he had found the will to live and return to his body.

Existence was about to pay hell for his choices on March 21<sup>st</sup> of that year, but Harry had sworn to himself and to everyone else - for no one anywhere was safe from this coming catastrophe - that he would give his life to prevent it, if it came to that--and Harry thought it just may.

There was time, despite his injuries there was time. Sixty four days lay between now and the Autumnal Equinox - where the one chance for everything would be played out, with the chance of a coin-flip on either side. *Harry against Allarius.*

A demon born of the darkness in Harry's curse scar link. How that had happened was a question for later. All that mattered now was that it be prevented, perhaps rearranged to have never happened. Time would tell, as Destiny and Fate had long since abandoned this game.

*Time is all we have left, and yet there's none of it!* Irony, sometimes, knows no bounds.

It was like a counter on a bomb - ticking down until.... *BOOM!* Harry carried that bomb on his back, and he had no idea at this point, as the only hope for us all swayed and almost fell at the door to Bartemius Crouch's office, of the terrible price he would have to pay in time to fix the damage he had unknowingly caused.

Magic was everything in this dangerous string of universes - it was the focal point for the existence of all other strings - if this one were to snap, to fall, it would be like taking away the foundations of a fragiley built stack. *Game over.*

*Nothing was certain anymore - if it ever had been - and time would tell.*

If the worst should fall, would it end with a bang or a whimper?

Harry understood - better than anyone or anything thought. Underestimated to the bitter end, this tired mortal boy would battle for the very right to exist once more in the space between universes, the Stream - which transported one between worlds - and the Boundary - which now resembled a torn and burning piece of thin fabric.

And somewhere in it all was a dark, physical manifestation of Evil itself. *Beelzebub, that you?* Evil that was actively working against the last hope for us all. Evil that had marked Harry as its biggest threat, who wanted everything to end.

*I guess I just get a kick out of hearing a billion voices screaming in unison.*

It would get that *kick* before we're done.

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## Chapter 18 - Circling Closer to the Flame

*You shouldn't let all the wrong in the world  
bother you, because chances are you don't  
know the half of it.*

*~~Megan Weilacher*

There is something to be said for the ability of some of us to react in a situation that sheds all sense of normality.

Take, let's say, a car accident. Two cars - no more, no less - one travelling almost three times the speed limit, the other pulling out of a car park onto the same road as the first car. The driver of the car pulling out onto the road glances quickly left and right - and sees this other car still a good distance away, presumably doing the speed limit.

*I've got enough time to pull out*, the driver thinks, and even as they are thinking it their car is already halfway out onto the road. *BAM!*

Not even enough time to react. The maniac driving their car at three times the regular speed limit - let's say 140 kilometres per hour - doesn't even leave skid marks on the road because they simply do not register what they are seeing before they hit the first car, which - for whatever reason - was doing exactly that which they were licensed for.

In these situations Fate - if there is such a thing - usually allows the maniac to be able to walk away from such an accident. One car travelling that fast, hits another barely moving. The car that isn't moving is going to spin, if clipped on the bonnet, and come to a rest some sixty feet from where they were pulling out of the car park - with the engine shoved up into the passenger seat, and let's imagine - just for fun - that seat was already occupied.

The speeder is cushioned by their airbag, and get out of their car with maybe a bloody nose - most likely in a daze of shock as they see the occupants of the car they have hit.

Let's expand on this. It's a busy day, there are many pedestrians and witnesses to the accident - how many react, how many stand there in

fear and shock themselves, how many reach for their phones to call the emergency services.

*Surprisingly, next to no one will do nothing.* It's been seen and done a hundred times - shock will paralyse you. It's human instinct to survive, to avoid danger. There is a good chance that instinct will override decency and what your brain and heart - your soul even - screams you must do. There is nothing wrong with that, you should trust your instincts. You're dead if you don't.

You're standing there; glass and metal are twisted and sprayed over the road. There is a man *stepping out* of his car with nothing more than a blood nose. You glance over, nausea already building in your stomach, to the other car and see that the driver now has their foot caught up past their ear. None of the occupants of that car are moving, but they are screaming. *What do you do?*

*Shit man, you call for help!*

But you can't - this is not a normal situation. Someone should be doing something, is that someone you? Think about it - oh no you can't, there's not enough time. Fifteen seconds have already past since the maniac ruined four lives - and nobody is doing anything.

*Tick-Tock, Tick-Tock, Tick-Tock.*

*Say, can you hear that? It's the sound of the Reaper!*

Twenty five seconds pass and now a lone man rushes past you towards the accident. He's run from over four hundred feet away. He's got a mobile phone, he's lived in this area his whole life, and yet he glances up at the street sign to make sure he gets it right as he screams the name of it down the small handset.

The screams have already stopped in the victim's car, and that adds some sense of realism to the accident. *Jesus... you think, this is real! There are people dead or dying over there, and I'm just standing here. What... what do....I?*

Indecision gnaws at you for a good ten, fifteen seconds - and it's been the better part of a minute now. Cracked glass in the car's

windshield is like a spider's web, covered in a splatter of blood - Gods....

Soon enough you realise you can hear sirens in the distance, and relax - in spite of yourself - because someone trained to handle these situations is coming, it's not your problem. You begin to walk away; after all you need to go buy some useless shit like a pillow that tells the time - or something equally pointless built in a bankrupt society. We are, after all, only human.

You may talk about it later to someone you know - *Yes... it was terrible. Truly horrific. Bloody idiot was going at least twice the speed limit - I stayed until the ambulance arrived, just to make sure...*

We've walked away now, whilst the man with the cell phone is holding one of the victims who crawled out of the crashed car beneath him, his hands red with her blood, that same blood making a rather large red stain on the gravel and glass that litter the road.

The cell phone man no longer knows what to do himself as the bleeding woman dies in his lap. He's frozen now, with Death in his hands and behind his eyes. He can practically feel the life draining out of the woman in his arms.

The point of all that was we can't know how we would react unless forced into such a situation. Would you be the bystander, or the man on the cell phone? You don't know now, and you won't know until it means the difference between life and death for someone. You hold that power in your hands - the power to influence life and death.

We can't know how we would react; it's just one of those things. We may think we'd be quick, and brave, and jump right into the thick of it. But there are no guarantees, sometimes only self delusions.

Remember that, *remember this*, it could save someone's life. There is no room for indecision - Death doesn't like to be kept waiting.

\*\*\*\*

Harry's life had been riddled with indecision and terrible acts caused by the slashing blood soaked blade of humanity. He had been

walking the fine line between sanity and madness - *although how many of us are sane in this world?* - for years, and was tilting now towards the latter, if not jumping gladly into it.

*When you kill a man, it costs nothing to be polite.*

Harry stood on a wooden platform erected in front of the Fountain of Magical Brethren in the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic. He stood, his hands clasped behind his back and his odd and even eyes staring out at the four hundred or so people gathered before him. *Aurors, Ministry employees, hitwizards for hire... and volunteers.*

After his brief visit with Minister Crouch five hours ago - Harry had managed two or so hours of sleep, and had been given command of the remaining Auror forces and anything else he could scrape together from the ruined and battle-worn magical community.

A committee of advisors stood behind him, after all he may have fought many battles, but tactics and deployment were not his thing. He would *lead* the army against an enemy force of Death Eaters, and for that the Aurors had chosen him as their leader. You wouldn't want to fight for someone who wouldn't want to fight next to you. Harry would stand.

Clearing his throat, Harry continued to gaze out at the assembled mass of colour before him. He saw many wizards dressed in Muggle clothes, like he was, and this was good. The majority however were dressed in the white robes of the Auror. Standing tall and proud, waiting for him to speak.

He did, after a quick glance to the members of his team and that of the Order of the Phoenix.

"There..." he began. "There are some things worth dying for."

Amplified and uninterrupted, perhaps sounding a little weary, Harry's voice echoed to every corner of the Atrium.

"Many of you here, in fact I'd say all of you here have lost someone close to you in the past two months. Nothing can be done to bring

them back, I believe that to be a great truth - unchangeable - but their deaths do not have to be for nothing...."

Silence, nothing but a few shaky breaths.

"You have been assembled here now because we have learnt that the entire Death Eater force, led by Voldemort, is laying siege to the Muggle/Wizarding community of Saint Malo, on the north coast of France."

Gasps, some murmurs in a language Harry didn't know - but recognised as French.

"I know there are one hundred French Aurors in the crowd before me now, and rest assured you are all going home tonight. France has called for aid - the war would not be worth fighting here if we didn't help our only ally in a cold world."

As Harry spoke, a handful of Ministry employees began to hand out pieces of parchment with a few details upon them.

"For those of you who don't know the location, the parchment being circulated now holds the coordinates for Apparation as well as a rough guide to the terrain and layout of the city. We leave in five minutes, prepare yourselves as best you can. I will go first with the Order of the Phoenix and a few chosen others, and you will all follow a moment later - in groups of fifty. Understood?"

There was a small murmur of nervous consent.

"French Aurors already in the city have fortified a defence in the western rim. Many of the townsfolk are under Imperius and working against their will with the Death Eaters. Use stunners where appropriate. Let's go...."

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*4 hours later*

The Côte d'Émeraude (Emerald Coast) stretches west from the oyster beds of Cancale to the broad beaches of Pléneuf-Val-André, a



stunning coastline of rocky reefs and islets fringed with golden sand, vividly green shallows and aquamarine deeps.

The port of St. Malo is one of the largest on the Emerald Coast. It is famed for its walled city, accessible beaches and one of the highest tidal ranges in the world. And right now it was in flames.

Harry stood atop a large rooftop on one of the higher buildings in the city that he and the Aurors still held. He was dirty, tired, and had a bloodied bandage wrapped around a deep cut on his forehead.

He stood with his war advisors over a shaky table with maps of St. Malo, a guard of fifteen Aurors watching the action below grimly through the rising smoke and ash clouds. Thunder and lightning the likes of which had never been seen anywhere crackled across the sky in forks hundreds of feet thick.

This was another one of the increasingly frequent 'unnatural' disasters that were currently plaguing and destroying the world. Harry was well aware why it was happening, and he knew it was exactly the reason no Muggle emergency services or military assistance had arrived within the last three hours. France and many surrounding nations were being battered by this freak storm that had descended upon half of Europe. This small town was of little concern.

"They're pushing forward through here," Sirius Black said, pointing to a large grassy area in the centre of the port town.

Harry was barely listening. He was gazing out over the sea where a lightning show was lighting up the water for miles. Waves of great height toppled over the sea wall and had begun to flood the city. After a while this battle would either be won, lost... or drowned. Harry personally intended to win it.

"What's the move?" Dermas Trask asked, his hand on his sword hilt.

Harry sighed, and then readied himself. "Full attack at the centre - we either push them back now or flee. Either way this city is lost, we can at least take a couple of the bastards down before that happens."

Lightning flashed and it appeared for a few seconds that the entire sky was a deep, electric blue colour. It was so strong that Harry could taste the current on the air.

"World's falling apart..." Sophia Tréla whispered, looking at Harry with fear in her eyes.

Harry shrugged and turned away. He didn't know for sure that she was right, but he didn't know for sure that she was wrong either. *Come the equinox, he thought. All will be decided.... if I'm fast enough... smart enough.*

"Let's go," Harry said, the universes tearing themselves apart around him.

Time was all Harry had, and yet existence had none.

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Tired, dizzy, bloodied, cold, afraid, and lost, Harry led the remainder of his Auror force forward onto the grassy plains in the middle of the city. Huge magical fireballs arced through the stormy sky overhead, and a group of special technicians shot them out with an accuracy few could have managed.

They didn't get them all though, and a group of seven Aurors were incinerated by the blood red flame meteors. *I hate this part,* Harry thought, as he watched the approaching Death Eater army. Several hundred, swelled with Muggle townsfolk under Imperius, and with Voldemort at their head.

*The Dark Lord,* Harry thought, his eyes growing cold and dark. His palms suddenly burst with blue lightning a million times more powerful than that which raged overhead. *I'll kill him now, and the Death Eaters will flee.*

The once green grass plain in the middle of the city had been reduced to ash and was littered with debris and pockmarked with lightning strikes. Behind Harry walked one hundred and fifty good fighters, not a one without an injury. To his left and right walked the

people he knew best. Sirius, Dermal, Sophia, Tonks, Art Nuan, Grace Arnair, and, surprisingly, Severus Snape.

No more betrayals or lying in this war. The potions master had had to choose a side, and he had chosen well.

The two forces stopped two hundred feet from each other, black and white, good and evil, right and wrong. Harry was partially hidden behind Sirius, and he wasn't connected to this Voldemort, so it was going to come as one hell of a surprise when he stepped out and faced his enemy.

*Like black roses in the wind*, a voice that belonged to another enemy, Allarius, whispered in his mind, laughing.

"Shut up you bastard...." Harry whispered, understanding that he was actually communicating with the demon. The cloth of existence had grown so thin he wouldn't be surprised if Allarius could step into the real world soon enough.

*Soon enough indeed, Potter. Ha Ha Ha! Go, fight your war. It is of little importance to our business. You're wasting your time fighting the inevitable.*

Harry stepped out from behind Sirius, all the while fighting the voice in his head with what strength he possessed in his mind. From this distance he felt, more than saw Voldemort's shock and... fear at seeing the boy with the power to defeat him come back from the dead.

*Surprise, asshole*, Harry thought, and three hundred miles away the British Ministry lay in flames and ruin.

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It had all been a diversion, after all. Voldemort had led seventy percent of his forces against the French port town, emptying the Ministry of all but its smallest defences. There was no time to activate the defence wards, as the Death Eaters portkeyed in and began to kill anything that moved.

The battle didn't last long, but many died and the British government collapsed within minutes with the death of Bartemius Crouch Sr. and his top people. Killed by his son who was released from the Ministry Holding Cells buried deep beneath the ground. The aging Minister had been at the front line in the defence of the Atrium. He had fallen with his ministry.

*Gone down with the ship, one might say.*

Thirty high profile Death Eaters were released from the Ministry, along with a boy Harry had known as Ethan Rafe. Voldemort's spawn from his more *human* days. Three magical explosive devices, much like the ones that had destroyed Trafalgar Square in Muggle London, had been planted on three key levels within the Ministry complex.

Twenty seven minutes after the Death Eater force had portkeyed into the Ministry, the devices exploded with enough force to reduce brick to dust, and metal to liquid. The Ministry collapsed in on itself, taking with it five hundred and forty seven lives.

The streets above the Ministry in Muggle London fell into the hole left by the Ministry, but this mostly went unnoticed by the Muggles themselves, as London was currently in flames from the tremendous power of the lightning storms overhead.

This destruction of the city, and most of Europe, was mirrored along every other Earth in the web of Existence. Cities fell, land burnt, oceans boiled, the sky was torn asunder, and only one small speck of life in this universe could do anything about it - but he had to wait sixty four days until the Sun was properly aligned in the sky.

It was all ending, and it would end with nothing left to mark the spot where we all used to live and play.... maybe, if time ran out - which it was.

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It was always the same. Life taking life. Harry had expected it, even as he sent out long blue tendrils of lightning-fire from his encased glowing arms towards Voldemort, the Dark Lord Disappeared.

The Death Eater forces broke with the retreat of their Master, and Harry alongside one hundred Aurors, fought to take out as many as possible before they all fled. It wasn't about right or wrong anymore, it was about survival.

He was seeing black spots of fatigue before his eyes and knew he was dead on his feet. He needed sleep, needed to recover naturally from the Nundu poisoning he had suffered for over two months, as the world ended.

"Not again," Sirius sighed, as the side of Light was left alone in the flaming wreckage of the French town. He was cursing the loss of their main target, Voldemort. "When will it end?"

Harry shrugged, stunning the members of the townsfolk still under Imperius. "With any luck not for at least sixty five days."

They were both discussing different things, but Harry's was more important. *Sixty four days*, he repeated to himself in his mind. *Equinox in sixty four days*.

Harry could see what was happening to the Boundary that separated all worlds and universes. His curse scar, which was soaked in death and pain, had torn a hole through from his real world, to connect him once again with a being of supreme power and evil. A being that no longer looked human, and quite possibly never had.

The fabric of everything was thin, stretched, burning. Harry wondered with a sick feeling in his stomach how much longer that fabric could hold, before his link of pure evil tore a big enough hole to snap all the threads holding it all together.

*Christ, what have I done?* Harry thought. If given the chance, he would now choose not to have stepped into the Boundary all those months ago. His universe would have fallen if he hadn't, but every other one would have survived. But now... everything rested on his shoulders, and they were breaking.

*It's too heavy, Potter,* Allarius said within his mind. *Sleep, and we'll talk... it'll hurt, but what doesn't anymore?*

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*Two Days Later*  
*62 days until the Autumnal Equinox*

Hogwarts.

*Hoggy Warty Hogwarts.*

The ancient school was all that remained of Wizarding Britain. It had become a refuge in the days following the Ministry's destruction. Hundreds of magical tents lined the green grounds, tents bigger on the inside than out, and most of the students who had been home for the summer had fled to the only place they knew to be safe, bringing their families with them, of course.

Even the Muggleborn students had brought their parents, brothers, and sisters to the castle, which was also suffering the effects of worldwide destruction.

After the terrible storms of only two days ago, the weather had taken another dramatic shift, and as it stood now it was thirty five degrees Celsius in the shade. One hell of a change, and no one could do anything about it.

Magical cooling charms had been placed across the grounds by many wizards and witches, but this wasn't a heat that could be quenched by so little magic, as it was created by a greater magic. They would just have to sweat it out.

*You can't save them all, Potter, a familiar, unwanted voice said in Harry's head. And soon you'll have killed them all. Ha ha ha!*

Harry stood atop the Astronomy tower at Hogwarts, sweating in the unnatural heat that was rising in a hot bellowing wind around him. He was wearing black jeans and a white polo shirt on top of his basilisk armour, which he wore constantly now.

Having just awoken from a thirty six hour 'nap', Harry felt stronger and more alert than he had done in months. It had been almost none stop for twelve hours after he and the remaining Aurors had returned from

France. They had returned to find the Ministry had been reduced to nothing more than a smoking hole in the ground.

After that they had come back to Hogwarts, where Albus Dumbledore was struggling to hold some sort of governing power over the Wizarding community. But it was gone. Britain was alone in a battle torn world, and Hogwarts was all she had left. Harry had been out with the Aurors, patrolling the grounds as more and more people fled to the castle. Voldemort was still out there after all.

He had decided to catch a few hours sleep after the patrol, and had managed to sleep for one and a half days. He had needed it. In that time several thousand people had arrived at Hogwarts, the powerful storms had been replaced by sweltering heat, and Allarius had killed him in many new and imaginative ways in the nightmares he could no longer escape or block out with potions.

*Gonna have us some fun tonight, Harry, the voice of Evil said. You can't fight me forever, because forever doesn't exist anymore. We're down to days now, weeks. Time's fucked and so are you.*

In spite of himself, Harry shuddered, holding the piece of parchment in his hands loosely. It was an important piece of parchment, given to him by Dumbledore half an hour ago. It held the location of Slytherin Fortress, one of the last things the British Ministry had ever succeeded in doing.

[Loch Leven](#), the paper began. And that did make sense, once you saw it and understood the riddle.

*Greet part of **e**leven, and leave a few from **se**ven.*

Fits. As well as it should.

*Follow the lock and wood.*

A play on words that further solidified the location of the fortress. Change *lock* to *loch*, and it made sense again.

The riddle also gave a staring point, through which, Dumbledore had surmised, the fortress would be revealed - if one were looking for it.

*Ever you are true of blood, none but the heir, is the one.*

A deep connection this one, and almost impossible to see - but, like with all good riddles, it fit perfectly once the answer was known. If that verse was taken as a metaphor for family, say Slytherin's family... or heir... the word *Kin* could be used to associate with that.

Fittingly enough, the name of the town that sat only seven miles east of Glencoe, was ***Kinlochleven***. A forest, or wood, marked the edge of the town and ran alongside the loch. Slytherin Fortress was due north from that location, and would reveal itself to anyone with the purpose of finding it in their minds.

Having existed for over a thousand years, Kinlochleven was originally a Wizarding settlement, before Muggles had moved in. None knew it anymore, but this town was founded by Salazar Slytherin himself, as it was the site where he was born aside the loch.

*But none of this matters, Potter, Allarius laughed in Harry's mind. It is over, after aeons on top of aeons it is all coming to an end. Armageddon - you know how often that happens? I don't either but I'd think it a safe bet if I put my money on sometime this year.*

*Shut up, Harry replied. Save it for the Devil, I'll be sending you down to meet him real soon.*

Laughter.

*All you are is a ball of mingled bravery and stupidity. Don't you understand yet, Harry? I am the Devil. You've messed with the best, Potter, now you'll die like the rest. Hey, that rhymes! Ha ha-*

Using every ounce of will and power his ruined, tired, and more than a little insane mind possessed, Harry pushed the voice back to the abyss - to the Stream where, for now, it was amplified into his head from.

"What to do...?" he asked himself, and, perhaps, hoping for a higher power to hear him.



It didn't seem right that everything should fall to him. Where was God in all of this? His creation, if He did indeed create it, was about to be torn apart as if it were nothing more than a piece of paper. Harry was just a mortal, able to die, able to feel pain.

He had never much believed in God. Now he sat on the parapet of the balcony up on the Astronomy Tower, and questioned his belief - as all do at sometime. He saw the smoking remains of Hogsmeade in the distance, and the long billowing cumulus clouds that stretched for miles to the horizon and beyond. The last remnants of the great storms that had burnt the land. The forbidden forest seemed to shake in the heat, and a thousand or more tents shimmered upon the grounds.

*But what was the point of it all when it could end so easily?*

Life was fragile, Harry had taken enough of it to know that - but why was Existence so fragile as well? He was just one small spark of life among an uncountable number across infinite universes, and yet his one choice had doomed destruction across them all. Surely something as large as this would attract the attention of the Creator, if there was such a being - and what would it mean if there wasn't? - or at least one of His (*or Her*) emissaries.

*Where are the bloody angels?* Harry asked, an insane grin spreading across his rough and unshaven face. If anyone looked upon Harry at that moment, they would see the insanity he held in his eyes. One pale one deep. As he thought this, he realised he was thinking something else as well, and was completely shocked to realise he was praying.

*God? You there? It's Harry, you know, Harry Potter.... I was just wondering... if you're not too busy... if you'd help us out with a little of the old divine intervention. You see, I sort of messed up and I don't think I'm strong enough to fix....*

Harry stopped there as his forehead exploded with pain from his scar.

*Oh, Potter!* cried Allarius, and Harry could almost see him rolling around laughing. *Prayer! You're getting desperate! Ha Ha HA HA!*

*Haven't you had enough? Done enough? Seen enough? End it! Go on, just jump off this tower... SMACK! Blissful death.*

Tears of despair and fear rolled down Harry's cheeks unnoticed.

*ALONE!*

Soon he'd have no more tears left to cry. He took one look at the ground below him several hundred feet away, took a shuddering breath, bit his lip in indecision for just a moment, and then jumped.

Harry jumped and closed his eyes, the heat being replaced by a cool wind that he fell through with nothing but the force of gravity to back him up. His hair blew up on the top of his head in a thousand separate strands that clung to his scalp and stood on end.

Buffeting winds sent him into an arc and a somewhat graceful spin in the air, his eyes flying open and observing the torn and dying world around him. Everything seemed so slow, as if he was floating down to the ground instead of plummeting. He felt as if, had he the urge, he could have counted and admired every stone of the castle tower he fell parallel to.

No longer having the need for glasses, Harry didn't fear losing his sight as the ground approached with an aching slowness. He felt his addled mind clear; he saw the rows upon rows of magical home-tents on the castle grounds, stretching right to the lake edge. The Auror patrols by the gates looked tired and dejected; he thought he could see that from this distance.

The wind had died down to almost a whisper, a faint memory of a faster time. Harry fell in slow arcing circles, his arms above his head and regret in his eyes. He had no intention whatsoever of transforming into a griffin, of saving himself.

*Let it all fail, he thought. That'll stop the fighting, the wars, the suffering.*

Halfway between the balcony and the ground, Harry closed his eyes again and felt time speed back up around him. The wind began

gushing in torrents across his falling form, and the rush pulled his stomach up as his adrenalin pumped quickly.

He fell another eighty feet, and all was calm in his mind. He knew he'd now fallen too far for his griffin form to have any chance of saving him - and was, for all he knew, dead.

*Shit I don't know that! Who's to say the fall will kill me? Nothing else works, why should this?*

Smiling insanely and even uttering a small chuckle that was drowned out by the wind, Harry braced himself for the impact - no longer caring, it was over - Existence, and Creation fell with him, and he did not care.

*He did not care.*

*...or did he?*

They say, Harry had heard, that just before you die your life flashes before your eyes. Now Harry had nearly died hundreds of times, and never before had this happened. It did now. But instead of seeing his whole life, he saw bits and pieces of every death he had ever witnessed or caused.

Flashes upon flashes of life ending, by his hand or another. Sirius through the veil, the explosion of Number 4 Privet Drive, Ethan Rafe on the Muggle street, lines of Death Eaters and Aurors.

Meat in the goddamn grinder.

*It'll all be for nothing if you end it now, you know,* a different voice from that of the demon said in his head. And Harry thought this clam voice sounded like Ginny - his Ginny - the Ginny he'd left behind for insanity.

*Fight it, defy it - that's what you do, Harry. That's who you are!*

That voice belonged to Ron... the *real* Ron.

*It's hard, it always will be. Never give up - never. It's dark, so turn on the light.*

Hermione... the one he loved.

*Hell of a mess, Potter. One HELL of a mess! Pull yourself together, son. Trillions of worlds are counting on you. Tens of trillions. You haven't even begun to fight yet.*

That one sounded like Alastor 'Mad Eye' Moody.

*Choice, Harry. It's a universal constant - choice. Make the right one.*

Albus Dumbledore.

*Hey, Kid, not like this. You're better than that, better than any death.*

Sirius Black... deceased.

*Hearing voices is never a good sign, Harry. HAHAAHA!*

That was Allarius, and now only one hundred feet off the grassy ground Harry grit his teeth in anger - an emotion he knew and saw very well.

What he did next seemed so natural, so right, that Harry would never be sure if it was all him - ever - and not some higher power, his own perhaps, that had stepped in.

*Divine freakin' intervention?*

Clenching his fists, Harry opened his eyes and saw blue fire-lightning had encased his arms up to the elbows. Sprung forth from whatever deep well of strength resided within him. It shone and pulsated that deep electric colour as it flowed in currents down his forearms. It was different this time though; it felt heavier - less violent.

With a cry, Harry threw his arms outwards and long tendrils of blue fire erupted towards the ground, grasping it and spreading out across his back to form a cradle. Harry spun and flipped within a ball of lightning that was giving off sparks and that was completely harmless.

Almost instantly Harry felt his velocity lessen, as he was cushioned by his magic, *saved* by his magic. The blue lines of power hooked themselves onto the castle walls and ground as he fell the final few feet, and Harry felt only the slightest strain as they took his weight and carried him softly, safely, down to the ground.

Nothing was damaged. The grass he now lay on, gazing up at the cloudless sky, still shone faintly blue from the power - as did the castle walls, as did Harry himself. Time took on little meaning as he gazed skyward, feeling a whole new respect for the power he could wield.

Eventually, it may have been a second it may have been a day, Harry blinked and as he did he heard an ache as the ground around him stretched and long, green stalks grew before his very eyes. He sat up, twenty feet from the outer wall of the Astronomy Tower in one of the castle quads just before the tent-field really began. He sat up, and gazed around himself in silent wonder.

*There were roses, roses growing into life before his very eyes.*

Harry could still see the faint glow of his blue ... magic, he supposed - though he felt it may be something beyond that... *power* in the ground and wherever it shone more stems shot up and bloomed into amazing white roses. Vines of stunning brilliance crawled up the once clear castle walls and, once again, white rose buds bloomed across them - adorning the tower.

*A field, a field of roses. Not black, but white.*

This was the hottest day for this part of the world in history, but Harry felt a cool breeze that seemed to come from himself and the beautiful plants he had created - nullifying the temperature. Making it normal - bearable. Drops of dew sprung from within the hearts of these flowers, flying on the wind and catching in his messy hair.

Harry laughed, clear and true and honest. It was the first time in months, perhaps years that he had ever laughed so truthfully. It seemed to give power to the cool breeze, which intensified and relaxed him beyond anything he had felt for months.

*They're real, he thought. Not magic... made by magic... but not magic. They're natural. That feels right.*

It was almost impossible to feel sad and pain sitting in this mingled patch of inherently good roses. His problems and feelings of only a few minutes ago were forgotten, and Harry regained something he was sure he had lost forever.

*Hope.* The white rose was hope - and he was the white rose.

Also, Harry felt refreshed - changed, purer. He had, subconsciously, used his magic for creation instead of destruction. He could not remember the last time he had done anything but use his awesome power for destruction, to fight. This was different, the exact opposite.

*It doesn't just destroy,* he thought.

*I don't just destroy.*

Happy days.

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*1 Day Later, 1 Day Less*

The entire Auror force now numbered one hundred and seventy six and every last one of them was guarding Hogwarts. Two and half months of constant war against Voldemort had weakened their, and his, ranks. The world had also been tearing itself apart quite spectacularly, and this had made Apparation and Portkey use sketchy at best.

The disasters plaguing the world had made Portkeys impossible to program properly. People were appearing hundreds of miles away from their set destination - and sometimes not at all. There was too much inconsistency in the atmosphere and magic. It had grown thin... stretched... weak, as existence began to fail.

The same could be said for Apparation, although it was a hell of a lot more accurate - but not one hundred per cent anymore. There was a good chance one could Apparate into a wall or leave half of

themselves behind, even if they did everything right. At Hogwarts, Dumbledore had advised against Apparating away from the castle, and staying within the ward lines at all times. His advice was heeded.

Far up in the backwaters of the castle, four students sat in the armchairs by the fireplace in the red and gold Gryffindor common room. Ron Weasley sat next to Hermione Granger on one extended chair, while Ginny Weasley and Neville Longbottom sat together on another. Couples next to couples.

Due to their close friendships, and for the two Weasley's involvement with the Order of the Phoenix, the four of them had been back at the castle for a few days now - the first among many to return to the only safe haven in the world.

A Wizarding wireless was playing across the room - a repeat of the final show which was now on constant loop beneath the remains of Diagon Alley. It would play such as it was for roughly four months before the magic that kept it going ran out. But by that time it wouldn't matter, as no one would be left to hear it....

"Can you believe this?" Ron Weasley breathed, his arm across Hermione's shoulders tracing small circles on her right one with his fingers almost absently. "No Ministry, no Diagon Alley, no nothing. All that's left is Hogwarts."

"It's unbelievable," Hermione whispered, her eyes distant and tear streaked. "There isn't even any contact with the Muggles since Portkeys aren't working. Too far to walk and...."

"And it wouldn't matter anyway," Neville sighed, his hands shaking involuntarily. "London was reduced to ash from those storms the other day.... it's ... it's...."

"It's over," Ginny finished. "Hogsmeade's gone as well. For all we know all that's left is Hogwarts... in the entire world!"

Hermione waved her wand and cast another cooling charm around their small area by the empty fireplace. That was another thing; the entire Floo network was down - the worldwide network.

Dark days.

Perhaps four dozen other Gryffindors moved about in the common room, casting cooling charms and talking in imperceptible whispers - all afraid.

"Do you think... do you think You Know Who's doing this?" asked Ron, voicing what they were all thinking.

Hermione was shaking her head though as soon as the question was asked. "No... whatever's happening, he's not powerful enough to cause it. I don't think anyone is."

Silence and then,

"What about Harry Potter?" said Neville.

Ron frowned and after a moment's thought shook his head and cast a cooling charm of his own. "No... if anything, he's probably trying to stop whatever's happening. He just... I just get this feeling about him, and it's not a bad feeling."

Ginny sighed and sat up straighter in her chair. "Yeah, I got that as well - when he's close by it's like... I feel I could do anything, absolutely anything - and it would be right, I'd be doing a good thing no matter what it was."

Hermione cast a cooling charm across her sweaty and flushed face, relishing the cool breeze. "Has anyone seen him lately?" she asked. "I saw him last night - coming in through the castle doors with a rose in his left hand. He was smiling and...."

"And what?" asked Ginny.

Hermione shrugged. "Glowing. He was glowing faintly blue. I could only see it when he moved into the light, but he was definitely blue."

"A rose..." Neville said, shaking his head. "The courtyard on the east side of the Astronomy tower was full of them this morning - hundreds of them, perhaps thousands. Half of those camped out on the



grounds were walking amongst them because it was cool, the breeze coming from them was cold. Do you think it was, Harry?"

"We could find him and ask him," Ron speculated, stroking the small fuzz he had growing under his chin. "But I guess he might not even remember us now. Seamus says he was out for two months in the hospital wing - sick. And we did only meet him once or twice before that."

Neville chuckled. "Yeah, when he kicked the shit out of Malfoy."

"I'm glad that git's gone," Ron muttered. "Him and half the Slytherins - gone to join their fathers with You Know Who most likely."

Hermione renewed the cooling charm; the heat was damn near unbearable, and sighed. "You're probably right," she said. "Shame though...."

Outside, two thousand people ambled in and around the grounds - and more were arriving every hour. Dumbledore was hard put to it to find and/or conjure magical apartment tents, but many had been salvaged from the ruins of Hogsmeade and Diagon Alley before transportation went to hell - and as long as the raw materials were at hand, many more could be created.

There was a rough community system developing out on the grounds, and a temporary kitchen set up by the house elves to feed the hungry masses - many of whom were Muggles - until better accommodation could be built and provided. There were people, magical folk mostly but many Muggles not shy of labour, with enough skills to construct proper homes, walls, houses that were a hundred times bigger on the inside. It would all appear in time, within the next two weeks or so.

"When do you think this heat will die down?" Ron asked tiredly, wiping the sweat from his brow.

"Don't think the weather can be forecast anymore," Hermione replied. "Soon, hopefully."

"It'd help if the *Prophet* was still printing," Ginny mumbled absently, gazing out at the shimmering heat through the window across the room.

"It'd help if a lot of things were still working," Neville whispered. "Do any of you guys feel that it's not going to get better?"

Silence, what could be said to that? They all felt it, everyone in Hogwarts did. Everything was ending, including life, and that made them sensitive to the chaos existence was in. Time was not a luxury, it was all but over. Nothing could be done.

*Hope was dead and buried.*

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The Room of Requirement had served many uses over the long centuries of Hogwarts's history. In times of crisis it could become a war room, or a broom closet. A place for young teenagers to hide, or *mingle*. The uses were infinite, and yet it always came back to one basic use.

A meeting room - a room used to discuss the fate of the Wizarding world.

Seated in the room now, at an elongated table with fifty polished and cushioned dark oak chairs, were those who had taken it upon themselves to turn Hogwarts into the last community in Britain. Basically the last form of governing body in the United Kingdom... perhaps the world.

At the head of the table sat, who else but, Albus Dumbledore. The oldest and most revered wizard alive in this world. Sitting opposite each other down the long table were all the surviving members of the Order of the Phoenix, Harry's hand picked squad, various Ministry officials that had survived the destruction, a group of Muggles representing their interests from the growing number out on the grounds - the enchantments had been lifted from the castle, making it visible to all.

At the opposite end of the table, sitting with his head leaning in his left palm on the arm of the chair, dressed in a simple pair of jeans and a white polo shirt - complete with basilisk armour - was Harry James Potter, the Boy Who Lived, Saviour, Hero, Warrior, Wizard.... teenager.

The meeting had only just begun and already Harry could tell that it was going to take hours at the current rate of discussion. He saw that most at the table were justifiably frightened at what had, and what was, happening to their world. Destruction, mayhem and untold chaos. It had been a hellish year for all.

Harry looked around at the many familiar and unfamiliar faces with tired eyes, one pale one deep green. He saw Kingsley Shacklebolt, Remus Lupin, James Potter, Lily Potter, Sirius Black, Dermas Trask, Sophia Tréla, Art Nuan, Albus Dumbledore, Grace Arnair, Nymphadora Tonks, Arthur Weasley, Bill Weasley, Molly Weasley, Fred and George Weasley, Amelia Bones, Severus Snape... and many others.

The room had been required to be cool, cold against the sweltering unnatural heat the rest of the world was suffering under, and it had done this by using the flames from the dozens of torches on the wall - blue flames - to generate cold air, instead of heat. This cast a pale blue light over the occupants of the Room of Requirement.

"We cannot ignore the threat still presented by Voldemort," Albus Dumbledore spoke from the end of the table opposite Harry. "Hogwarts must be defended."

Nods of agreement from the wizards and witches, the magical folk, but uncertainty from the half a dozen Muggles in the room. One of them, an old man who looked to be about seventy or eighty, stood up - pushing his glasses up off the bridge of his nose as he did. He was the designated speaker for the Muggle representatives. Dumbledore nodded to him.

"Good afternoon, ladies and gents," he began, gazing up and down the table, glancing curiously at Harry for a moment longer than was comfortable and then turning to address the headmaster. "Ma name's Glen, Glen Thomas. My grandson is one of the students tha' attends

this school, and I've been chosen by my friends here to speak for us non-magical folk. What we'd like to know is, as none of you seem to be able to honestly tell us, who's this fellow Voldemort?"

"A wizard," Dumbledore replied. "A dark wizard intent on destroying all he deems unworthy. That would include everyone in this room, including you, Mr. Thomas. He is powerful, but not invincible - and we can expect him to attack this castle. You must understand, the Wizarding world has been engaged in war for twenty years with the Dark Lord Voldemort - we have only recently come close to defeating him."

"A bit of a bastard this fellow then," Glen Thomas decided before sitting down silently. Harry was the only one that laughed, and to many it sounded insane.

"Getting back to the issue," Dumbledore cleared his throat, glancing with concern at Harry. "I fear that with his ability to bypass the castle wards, Voldemort may move to strike us down soon. His remaining force is larger than our remaining Aurors - which Remus tells me is just over one hundred British Aurors and about sixty French."

Remus Lupin nodded, scratching his chin thoughtfully. "We would have even less but it is impossible for the French to return to France - unless they wanted to walk or take a carriage, but then there's the English Channel to negotiate. As you're probably all aware... Apparation, Portkeys, and the Floo network are all impossible now. Everything is out of alignment."

"What do we believe is happening to have caused this?" Sirius Black asked, glancing pointedly at Harry. All his feelings were telling him that this boy, this enigmatic stranger, knew the answer.

It was Dumbledore that replied though, and his answer wasn't too far from the terrible truth.

"Magic has fallen out of balance," he said fearfully, gravely, despairingly. "It may repair itself, given the proper catalyst, or it may continue to degrade. We have no control over this, and we have to assume that other magics may begin to fail. Be prepared, my friends."

"There is no precedence for this," Arthur Weasley exclaimed, fear in his eyes. "Why now? What's caused this?"

Everyone in the room fell silent, thoughtful, regretful. There were more than one or two looks cast in Harry's direction, but his remained expertly blank, and he met every gaze with a disconcerting one of his own.

"We should get back to the defence of Hogwarts," Sirius Black said after a long moment had passed.

"The main problem here is we have too few to guard so many," James Potter said. "One hundred and fifty to defend near two thousand children and Muggles - one or two wizards and witches might fight, but...."

Glen Thomas was on his feet again, clearing his throat. "We're not entirely helpless, you know, son," he croaked, looking James up and down. "I've seen one or two wars during my life, I know how to fight - I'm willing to bet half the teenagers out on those green grounds you've got out there would fight as well, given the chance.

"Now," he continued. "I know it's not right when kids have to clean up our mess. But we have to work with what we can - my grandson Dean will fight; he's already told me so... We may not have your magics but with what I've heard hear you may not 'ave 'em much longer either. So what I'm suggesting is you use us... us *Muggles*, and let's say everyone over sixteen years of age."

Glen sat down with a grim look set upon his face, and once again Harry was the only one with a smile on his face - except this time it was one of respect.

There were cries of disapproval and more than a little outrage at his suggestion though, and it soon fell into full on bickering. Harry watched it all with increasing frustration - although he did notice that both Glen and Dumbledore didn't reduce themselves to arguing, they looked silent and thoughtful.

Harry already knew who the leaders were in this room, and was not surprised one of them was Muggle.

After Dumbledore raised his hands for silence, Severus Snape asked the question almost all of the magical folk were thinking. True to his background in espionage, Snape's voice held no emotion - time had gotten beyond that - and it was asked in an indifferent tone. The implications of this question, though, would decide the fate of all those at Hogwarts over the coming months.

"Do you truly believe, Mr. Thomas," Snape said, his greasy hair sprawled out on top of his head, his arms tucked into the folds of his robes, "that Muggles can stand against magic? What do you intend to use to defend yourself? Your grandson?"

Silence as Glen was given a chance to reply. He stood up again, in the manner of an expert orator, and once more cleared his throat. "As I've said, sir," he addressed Snape. "I've served in many wars - ex-SAS, I am, for those who know what that was.... or is... can't be sure it still exists what with no phones, but it was the most highly regarded military organisation in our world, or so I'd like to believe anyway."

"Where's this going, Mr. Thomas?" Snape snapped, losing his *cool*.

Glen frowned, and continued a little tightly. "This castle is just a little north of the English-Scottish border, and to the west of Glencoe. If memory serves, and it usually does, sir, the town of Dumfries wouldn't be far from here. A few hours drive in a car, a few days walk without, but there is an SAS training ground there."

Lily Potter stirred nervously in her seat, glancing at the old man. She knew of the SAS, she had grown up a Muggle, but was Glen suggesting....

"I suggest we head down there," Glen said. "A group of us go down there and see what's what. Whether or not the town's still up and running, and whether or not the military will help us. And... well, if no one is there... the weapons may still be, if you understand me."

That hung in the air for a few decisive moments, and Harry was happy to see Dumbledore actually thinking about this suggestion. He decided to speak up for the first time.

"Muggle weaponry, barring anything electronic, would work at Hogwarts, wouldn't it?" he directed this question towards Dumbledore.

The Headmaster nodded slowly.

*You're sure this is a suitable application of your time?* A real voice in Harry's head that wasn't his own whispered.

"It's a good idea," Harry stated. "It'll give us an edge over the Death Eaters."

*Well shit... why don't I just come back later? When you're not busy, hmm?*

"What I think we should do is concentrate on the defence of Hogwarts for the next fortnight - no more and no less - after that, if Voldemort still lives, we head on over to Slytherin fortress and force him out finally."

Half of those seated along the polished oak table gasped when Harry said this, but they all saw the deadly seriousness in his eyes. This would happen with or without them.

"What do you suggest for the defence of this castle, Mr. Potter?" Dumbledore asked, valuing his opinion - probably more than anyone else's at the table.

Harry stood up, asserting himself. His head throbbed from the connection to Allarius, as existence failed, but it was bearable. "I say we do as Mr. Thomas suggested," Harry stated. "And a whole lot more on top of that."

"Such as what, Commander?" Sophia Tréla spoke, exerting a cool calm not many felt.

"Muggle weapons can and will stand the test against magic. I say we equip Muggles with them, if we get some, and any wizard who wants one. We also need to begin building defences - a wall around the perimeter right up to the lake, wide enough for three men to walk abreast upon it. There are enough with the skills here to do that, as well as some proper housing for the two thousand or so out there.

"We pull our thumbs out, defend what we have left as well as we can with what we can, and then take the fight to Voldemort if he doesn't come to us. Can anyone give me a reason why we shouldn't do this?"

Snape smirked. "Because it is madness, Potter! You want to turn Hogwarts into a fortress!?"

"Yes I do," Harry said. "The world is tearing itself apart out there." He pointed vaguely at the wall, meaning the world behind it. "There may be more threats than just Voldemort... people can do terrible things to survive... everything becomes more dangerous when you're looking out for yourself."

"What are you saying?" asked Dermal Trask, his hand on his sword hilt.

Harry sighed and sat down, running a shaking hand - something he hid well - through his black hair. "We have no links to anything beyond the castle gates. Millions died in those storms a few days ago, we have to accept that and move on now. That's hard but I don't have time for anything else. All of our transportation magic is down, and Owl Post isn't working either. We have to defend what's left, and that is Hogwarts. We do whatever it takes with whatever it takes.

"Think about it... you'll realise I'm right. I don't want to be, but I guess that's just my lot for this game."

Dumbledore was rubbing his old forehead, his age lines prominent and shadowed blue in the cool torchlight. When he spoke, his voice sounded resigned - agreeable.

"This place was a school for one thousand years... not a fortress of war, Harry. I believe you're right... but, like yourself, I wish you weren't."

Harry nodded slowly to the Headmaster. "I guess that's approval for the plan. Now let's make it work. We're going to be fighting for freedom here, freedom from oppression, from fear... from death.... but freedom is not free, it never is. It costs us in souls, and we pay Hell for that.... We're going to do this, and do it right."



The next four hours were spent discussing and detailing Harry's, Glen's, and Dumbledore's basic idea, and reinforcing it with many others, changing and rearranging, before coming up with a rough plan to begin with. In the end it wasn't much, but then they didn't have much to work with.

Six hours after he had entered that room, Harry emerged last alongside Dumbledore and those he may have called parents - James, Lily, and Sirius. The other members of the committee were dispersing left and right along the corridor, in groups and alone, and Harry walked with his hands in his pockets.

"Good meeting," he commented to the small group around him. "Productive, if nothing else."

"Indeed," agreed Dumbledore. "I have to say I did not think we would get everyone to agree on the key issues. We have you to thank, in part, for that, Harry."

Harry waved his hand dismissively and the five of them were the last to start walking down the breezy corridor. Harry in the lead next to Dumbledore; James, Lily, and Sirius chatting warmly a few steps behind them.

"It's your birthday soon, Harry, isn't it?" Lily asked when they turned a corner.

Harry thought for a moment and realised she was right. He had forgotten, and really who could blame him? But yes, in a few days he turned seventeen - he felt a thousand times older.

"It doesn't matter," he said.

Sirius gasped and put an arm around Harry's shoulders. "We've got to at least have cake. You're going to be an adult."

James sighed and tried to smile. "Legally an adult, anyway."

"There's not enough time," Harry said pragmatically. "Just forget about it...."

"We can't do that!" Lily exclaimed. "You... you're-"

"Dead," he whispered. "You don't want to be celebrating the birthday of your dead son.... excuse me."

Without looking back, and walking with a hunch - as if some invisible weight were draped across his shoulders - Harry turned alone into another corridor that would lead towards the Entrance Hall. They had a job to do, after all, and to tarry would be foolish.

*Might grab some food from the elves first...* he thought briefly before his thoughts turned back once again to the Boundary, and the damage he had inadvertently caused.

Harry knew that whatever damage had been wrought upon this world, was mirrored in every other world along this string of universes. That meant his world would have suffered the losses, the damage, the pain of all these unnatural disasters.

It was catastrophic. Millions were already dead - there was no saving them, he hadn't even been given the chance to. They were gone....

*No*, he told himself. *I could... can... will... fix it. Somehow...*

"Even if it takes me a hundred years to fix it, I will," he whispered.

*Didn't your grandmother ever tell you not to say the worst out loud? I know mine did....*

\*\*\*\*

*Friday* *August*  
*51 Days until the Autumnal Equinox*

1

It had been less than a week since the meeting in the Room of Requirement, and in that time the Hogwarts grounds had been magically transformed into something that vaguely resembled its former self.

Large stone and wooden buildings had sprung up in neat rows to replace the magical tents that had been housing the refugees, for use

of a better word, that were still now flooding to the castle in numbers reaching on average two hundred a day.

None of those arriving had news of the outside world beyond seeing little life and a hell of a lot of destruction.

These structures were much like the tents, but whereas a single tent could house a family of seven comfortably enough, these buildings could house two hundred and fifty in magical comfort. They were a lot smaller on the outside than inside of course, and a lot of magical energy had gone into their construction.

Harry himself had leant raw power into their supports, and *that* had been more than enough,

No bigger than a normal four bedroom two bathroom Muggle home, sixteen of these structures ran in twos from the edge of the lake to about halfway across the castle grounds, with more going up daily. It was like one street that housed just less than three thousand Muggles and Magical folk.

The Muggles were more numerous, being about three to every one wizard, but they all worked together to exist in their growing community. Many were still clinging on to the belief that they wouldn't be here long though, and may soon return to their homes, that some form of their governing body must remain somewhere, that the dream of society couldn't have ended in a few *days*.

Almost daily a group of Muggles would head out of the magical atmosphere around Hogwarts - protected by a group of Aurors - and out onto the high ground surrounding the charred remains of Hogsmeade. These Muggles had portable telephones, mobile phones that still had some power, they tried to call or contact anybody from this location.

None of them got so much as a busy signal. The phone network was dead.

Also, around the long perimeter of the Hogwarts grounds, a large twenty foot high wall had been under construction for the past few days. It stretched from a few feet into the lake, along the length of the

face of the Forbidden forest and up near Hagrid's cabin. It wasn't completed yet, wouldn't be for a few more days, but it would be impressive at twenty feet high and seven feet thick.

Defence was most important, as those in charge kept telling everyone.

Those in charge... in the end it really came down to three figures out of three thousand. Two were old men, one Muggle one Magical, and the third was a teenage boy who felt like an old man.

Albus  
Glen  
Harry Potter

Dumbledore  
Thomas

They had all shaped the community into what it was in their own ways, and it wouldn't be what it was without them. Dumbledore saw to it that everything was kept in order, and Glen acted as liaison between Muggle and Wizard, whilst Harry was the hands-on bloke.

Shortly after the meeting in the Room of Requirement, on the same day in fact, Harry had called together all those who possessed some skill in construction, transfiguration, and ancient runes. There were a surprising amount of people who did, as if those needed to build this community had managed to arrive first. Harry had called them together and construction had begun.

*This could be seen, perhaps, as a sign that not everything was working against Harry.*

Planning was done by the Muggle constructors, transfiguration for furniture and home comforts by the Magicians of course, and those capable of carving ancient runes had magically enhanced the inside of the buildings to house not a family of four, but a family of two hundred and fifty.

Within the boundary of Hogwarts, the weather had cooled down tremendously - by at least thirty degrees Celsius, and thousands were thankful for this, though only a handful knew the reason why. As soon as one stepped outside of the construction line that marked the edge of the wall being built, the temperature went through the roof - gaining every degree it loses inside the castle grounds.

This localised area of cool inside the Hogwarts grounds was due to one factor though, and it was Harry's doing.

*White roses.*

No one could, or ever would, explain it. Alongside the wall being built and around the entire perimeter of the castle in a giant circle, Harry had walked and planted white roses. Thousands of them in a line several feet thick, with few gaps - the most notable one keeping the castle gates clear - that repelled the heat and, Harry believed, would repel any other weather phenomena thrown their way.

The white roses didn't exactly counteract the damage being caused by his scar and Allarius' black roses, but they slowed it down - weakened it. It had taken a few days and many laps of the perimeter alone, but Harry had given life to thousands of undying white flowers that had given tremendous respite from the heat.

Outside of the perimeter the world burned, people who had survived were dying, and everything continued its descent into hell.

Fifty days and counting now, folks. Can the fabric of existence hold itself up for that long?

Harry sat alone once again upon the balcony at the top of the Astronomy Tower. His mind's energy was currently being spent wrestling with Allarius, who was unstoppably growing more powerful in his Stream-confines. It was a disturbing thought.

*It's going to be a near-thing, Potter. Gods almighty.... I'm talking down to the second here.*

*Why do this?* Harry asked him tiredly.

*Every story must have a villain, Harry... Yours has more than any other, but you're doing alright, ain't ya?*

*Depends what you mean by alright,* he replied, gathering his will to force the demon from his mind. It seemed he couldn't escape having a being of immense evil inside his head. That was also a disturbing thought.

*Don't you ever tire of fighting, boy? Tire of the game?* Allarius' voice sounded gleeful and genuinely curious.

*Constantly*, Harry sighed. *Now piss off. I've got work to do.*

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## Chapter 19 - Demon Army

God is a comedian playing to an  
audience too afraid to laugh.

*~~Voltaire*

Billions upon infinite billions of worlds and universes exist in the smallest of spaces. Imperceptible to the eye, the vast distances between two atoms could not be crossed in a lifetime, if you were on that scale. Believe me, that is a hell of a lot of empty space - between just two atoms.

The universes are similar in spacing, lying almost right on top of each other - like a layer of thin paper. The space in between each sheet is extraordinary, all consuming, and full of nightmares. Monsters live in the darkness between universes, in the Stream and the Boundary.

Forever they have been kept banished by the magic, the power, of existence. Hidden in darkness for all eternity, these monsters that defy imagination, have spent the aeons alone tearing themselves apart. Occasionally one slips through into the universe of light, but it is usually a small matter best left undiscussed.

Darkness is all these monsters have, pure and unrelenting darkness for all time. Not a speck of light, not a chance of flesh or life - simple unfaltering darkness. Hate and anger drove these creatures insane when the universes were first created - how is anybody's guess? - and that situation has not improved with aeons of darkened captivity.

To say it would be bad if these monsters ever escaped into the universes would definitely be quite a bit of an understatement.... but everything was failing, moving towards the End - and the Boundary had weakened almost beyond the point of no return.

Evil had caused the destruction, evil in a once seemingly insignificant scar upon the forehead of a small boy in one of the infinite mortal worlds. This scar now acts as a beacon for the monsters in the Stream darkness, and it has created more than one doorway out of there millennia old prison.

Also, if someone were to give a monster the right... push... it may break free. But who would want to do that?

If anyone ever thought that things could not get worse, they didn't realise that Existence is a very cruel thing, and it was only just getting warmed up.

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### *49 Days until the Autumnal Equinox*

Four men and three women stood next to two dark carriages just on the edge of the ring of roses inside the Hogwarts castle grounds, about twenty feet from the castle gates. These carriages belonged to the school, and were harnessed with Thestrals - of which all of the seven people could see quite clearly.

Harry knelt down in front of one and ran a hand across its dark, almost skeletal mane. The creature growled deeply in response, enjoying the run of Harry's hand across its back.

"Remind me again what those are?" the old man Glen Thomas whispered, swallowing audibly.

"Thestrals, Grandad," Dean Thomas, seventh year Gryffindor, said. The school term hadn't started yet, and may not this year, but Dean was now, technically, a seventh year student. "Harmless as anything - tame."

"They look... *dark!*" he whispered.

Harry chuckled and gave the beast in front of him one of the blood dripping steaks from the preservation box lying in the gravel next to him. "Would you rather walk to Dumfries?" he asked. "One hundred and seven miles?"

Glen Thomas coughed and wiped a band of sweat off the dark skin of his forehead. "Not on your life, son. Perhaps forty years ago..."

"Hop on in the carriage then. I'll feed the rest."



Harry disappeared around the side of the first black, six-seater carriage with the box of meat levitated behind him, and everyone else began to climb into the cushioned carriages.

Glen and Dean Thomas chose the first carriage along with Nymphadora Tonks and a French Auror named Jennifer Estrez. A young woman like Tonks who possessed some small metamorphmagus abilities. Tonks was helping her develop the talent further, and as such her appearance was constantly changing. As she climbed into the carriage, her hair was waist length blue, face fairly angular and eyes a sharp grey.

Into the second carriage climbed Dermas Trask, wearing his basilisk armour and sword. From the bottom step he looked out upon the busy Hogwarts grounds, saw few people looking in their direction from the many thousand who were queuing for lunch from the extremely large house elf kitchen that had been set up near the lake. A twenty four hour service that kept the elves very busy and very happy.

Behind Dermas, Sophia Tréla waited patiently, looking out at the community that had built itself in the last few days. For all they knew it could be the last such place anywhere, as it was the only place unaffected by the weather phenomena plaguing the earth. She climbed into the carriage after Dermas, and was soon joined by Harry.

"All set then," Harry said, and as soon as he did the Thestrals began to move and pull the carriages.

Their departure wasn't farewelled, as their mission was a secret one. Only Dumbledore and a few select others knew that they had left, having chosen the most opportune time to leave, and it was to be kept that way until they returned. There were too many unknown variables around and about - the less people knew the longer they survived.

The Hogsmeade road and eventually the Muggle ones were deserted and wide enough for the carriages to roll side by side. Conversation passed between both Thestral-drawn vehicles and it was light, excited, eager, anxious. Everyone wanted to know what had happened to civilisation.

For the first few hours on the road, they didn't see any signs of life. This was actually quite normal for the long, empty roads of Scotland - which sometimes ran for a hundred miles or more without any other soul being seen, but this wasn't normal. It felt empty, because it was - probably for the length of the country.

In the past few days the weather had cooled down to a bearable twenty two degrees Celsius, with a heavy grey overcast. Storms were a-coming, and they were set to flood the earth. Harry gazed out of his carriage window at the passing countryside, talking little and thinking a lot.

As always, his thoughts were on his eventual return to his own universe-

*God...* that thought still amazed him, as he looked out at the horizon. A horizon that belonged to a completely different reality, so far away and yet right on top of his own.

He sat, looking out at the parched sun-stained landscape and in the distance saw the peak of Ben Nevis in Glencoe. Slytherin Fortress laid a few hundred miles in that direction.... They were wheeling along an empty two-lane Muggle road that was built on a curving piece of elevated ground, looking out down into a vast and dry valley.

They were a few hours out of Hogwarts and many hours still lay ahead on these empty ghost roads. They had passed through a small recently abandoned hamlet two hours ago, and that was their first sign that everyone may be gone... to where was anyone's guess. A strange smell had hung over the down, decay and death. Not everyone had left because they were dead.

Everything still showed signs of the tremendous thunderstorms of a week and a half ago. Fallen trees and power lines pockmarked roads and homes. It was way too quiet out here.

*I have to fix this*, Harry thought. *God knows how... but I have to.*

"We're about halfway there, son," Glen Thomas called between carriages, his sunburnt arm resting on the window sill of the black vehicle.

"Right you are," Harry replied, thinking briefly on what they were going to do.

They were heading to the town of Dumfries - which was about eight miles from the Scottish-English border, on the Scotland side. In his youth, Glen Thomas had been an SAS soldier, and knew of a training facility hidden in the forests around the large town. Muggle weaponry could be found there, if they wanted it - and all signs so far told them that they could take it unchallenged, to defend Hogwarts with.

Harry patted the small lump in his jeans pocket, which was a shrunken trunk containing many things. A broom, spare clothes and cloaks, destructive and restorative potions, a spare wand, knives and boots. It was his battle trunk, paid for by the Ministry months ago and never used. He hoped to be soon adding Muggle weaponry to his box - any advantage, after all, should be exploited.

*There was no time for morals anymore.*

The two identical carriages rounded a bend in the road, and were now looking out down at the Muggle motorway, which was - as expected - deserted. The road they were on now ran for a few more miles and then joined the A8, which was seven lanes wide. At this distance Harry could see dozens of cars parked here and there along and across the large road.

At this distance they appeared empty, but Harry didn't like to think what might be rotting in those vehicles... the smell would be the worst. Those cars would have been sitting out there for days, and as of a few days ago the temperature soared into the high forties (Celsius). No, this leg of the trip wasn't going to be fun.

"It's so quiet..." Sophia commented, gazing out of her own window at the approaching motorway.

"Too quiet," agreed Trask, and nothing more was said about that for now.

Harry's motorway predictions proved to be more than correct, and he had to purify the air in both carriages when they were still a quarter mile away from the main road. The smell was terrible, and they were

all gagging when Harry stopped to renew his charm every five minutes.

"We'll follow this down until Dumfries," Glen said. "It's alongside the River Nyth, and that's the beginnings of it there."

Harry followed Glen's gnarled and arthritic finger out over the road and saw a small stream flowing down a parched hillside. He could also see plenty of dry riverbed. The stream wasn't at its full strength.

They had set off from Hogwarts at noon, and it was now approaching eight o'clock and the Sun was beginning to set in the west. Always set late in summer, which was now approaching Autumn - something Harry looked forward to with an eagerness that was full on obsession. They would arrive at Dumfries just after midnight.

When the Sun finally did set, Harry looked up lazily at the night sky with tired eyes. It was still mostly covered with cloud, but there was a large portion of it through which the moon and a thousand stars were clearly visible. Harry knew, as he gazed up at the star shot patch of sky that they belonged to an alien world.

Not just different from those of his own world, because those stars weren't. No - that patch of sky up there had slipped in the destruction of existence, and actually belonged several million miles away, on the other side of this galaxy. Harry saw the moon, but it wasn't Earth's moon. The thought made him feel incredibly small and more aware of the scale upon which everything was ending.

Navigating the motorway proved to be more difficult than first thought. For one thing as they approached towns and the city of Carlisle, which was about twenty miles out of Dumfries, the traffic increased greatly. None of it was moving, and at times the Thestrals were forced to leave the road altogether and use the farmer's lane that ran alongside it. At other times the two carriages weaved through the mass of stinking dead metal, careful not to disturb the dead.

Harry glanced over into the lantern lit cabin of the carriage next to theirs and saw Glen Thomas had fallen asleep, that Jennifer was practicing her metamorphmagus abilities - with Tonks' guidance, and Dean was gazing absently out of his window at the dark world.

Behind Harry, Sophia and Dermas were speaking quietly to one another.

Harry returned his eyes to the alien sky and saw, with little to no surprise, that it had righted itself. Stars and a moon he knew now shone down once again upon the earth. The moon was half full - but even the phases of such a huge thing could not be certain anymore. It was worrying for Remus Lupin, whose condition made him sensitive to the fluctuations in the moon.

"Not good...." Harry breathed, and turned away with guilt upon his face.

It was then that a bright light lit up the horizon ahead for a few seconds, and Harry whistled for the Thestrals to stop as it did, the carriages coming to an abrupt halt on the motorway about twenty feet away from a large truck carrying ten, one thousand can pallets of Coca-Cola.

"Christ... what is that?" Dermas said, as the three of them disembarked from their carriage. They were soon joined by everybody but Glen from the other carriage, watching the light show on the horizon.

It lasted for about twenty five seconds, tearing up the horizon just beyond the next set of hills. Probably around the town of Dumfries, knowing Harry's luck. A tremendous, unbroken dome of bright white light that lit up the cool night sky.

"I think," Harry began, "that it may be nothing. But," He sighed here. "But it's in our road. Whatever it is we're heading towards it... I just got the shakes about it."

"Me too," Tonks whispered. "Well... we came all this way already, and we do have you with us Harry. You took down two Nundus on your own."

Harry clicked his teeth thoughtfully, continuing to look at the now black hills ahead. He didn't reply to Tonks, just got back into the carriage silently, and remained that way for the next ten miles.

\*\*\*\*

On the outskirts of the town of Dumfries, the silent and dead town of Dumfries, a large sphere of light was slowly receding and out of it walked a limping figure - roughly twelve feet high.

This figure was unlike any that had ever walked any world anywhere. It was grotesque, naked, covered in a tight scaly charred hide that resembled wet bark in texture. Eleven misshapen and three blind eyes had been thrown onto the creatures face and neck , and it had a single slit on its left cheek for a nose. No mouth and one loose piece of flesh on the side of its bald grey head for an ear.

Its chest was bloodied, corded with ancient muscles and around the throat was a single, long bleeding hole that harsh grunts were emerging from systematically. It had two legs, and a third which dangled down from its stomach but didn't touch the ground. It was decomposing and gangrenous.

The monster looked around itself, took a few rough breaths and a few rough steps. Each step it took lit the ground alight with roaring orange flame. All around it the remaining forms of life in this area; birds, bugs, foxes, even the fish in the river, began to flee - sensing and rightly fearing its evil and power.

Through the trees, the creature could see faint glowing lights - something it had never seen - and began to limp in that direction, murder and anger always on its mind.

All bets were off on this one... although / still wouldn't bet against Harry.

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"What can we expect if there are still people there, Glen?" Harry asked from his carriage as they approached the end of the motorway south.

"Well tha' depends, son," Glen replied, scratching his chin thoughtfully.

"On what?" asked Dermas.

"On whether or not they'll help us. Whether or not they have a line out to anyone, or even a radio - which is very likely."

Harry nodded. "We'll do better for ourselves if they're not there," he said. "Though I hope they are... its too quiet."

"I talked to a man who came to Hogwarts from Dumfries," Glen said. "He said the town was hit hard by the storms, and was emptying when he left."

Harry was shaking his head slowly. "It'll be empty. We'll take what we need and get back to Hogwarts probably for dinner tomorrow night."

*You might encounter one or two.... problems... along the way, Allarius sneered within Harry's head.*

Harry jumped back in his seat, unprepared for that assault.

"Harry... you okay?" Sophia asked.

Harry took a deep breath. "Fine."

*BOO! HA HA HA! When I say problems, I mean problems. Sod's Law - anything that can go wrong will go wrong.*

*What are you talking about?* asked Harry.

*I can't tell you. It'd spoil the surprise... it's a little late, but I got you a birthday present, Potter. Happy Seventeenth! You'll get a real kick out of this one.*

*I'll bet,* Harry sighed.

They rounded the final hill before Dumfries, the River Nyth flowing quite strongly beside the road, and saw a small splatter of lights down on in the town - but not a single car moving. This wasn't surprising as it was near midnight, but of a town this size you'd expect to see at least one. Harry was fairly certain it was deserted.

Harry directed the Thestrals to take the next exit off the motorway and onto the main road through the town. Glen said he knew the SAS training facility would be a mile or two out of town, if anywhere, but he wasn't certain where. He had only been there once, thirty years ago - and was a little fuzzy on the exact location. It was decided they'd roll through town and look for either signposts or a map.

As was expected, the smell of the town was putrid. Like old cheese and stale air, Dumfries had the weight of over a thousand dead upon it. Cars were piled up or turned over as they made their way towards the town centre, travelling in single file now to avoid the worst of the traffic jams and corpses.

"Well... this is what we expected," Dean Thomas said, looking grave but strong. Some people just had what it took, others didn't. Harry was glad Dean was here, if it had to be anyone.

Some of the street lamps worked, some had blown - most had blown. The streets were dirty, the buildings all had broken windows, and there was a body every twenty feet or so - on average. It had been a week and a half since the storms, and nothing and no one had come for these people. It would be like this across the *entire world... worlds*.

The River Nyth roared with ferocity to their right, as the Thestrals pulled the two carriages up an empty back alley towards the town centre. The wind blew almost silently across the dead town, disturbed by only Harry's group.

"Stop here," Harry said five minutes later, and the Thestrals stopped.

Not waiting to explain, Harry dismounted the carriage steps and walked over passed three bodies towards a broken glass window in the storefront of a shop that still had power.

**W H Smith**, the blue and white sign said above the door.

"Harry!" called Tonks. "What...?"

"I'll be half a minute."



Harry stepped into the deserted shop, noticing the storm damage more than he noticed the decomposing corpses on the floor. The smell though.... he held his shirt up over his nose. His boots crunched glass underfoot as he walked through this book store towards the Map section.

It didn't take long, and Harry was soon breathing the fresher air outside the shop, holding up a lantern to a map of Dumfries and the surrounding area back inside the carriage.

"What am I looking for, Glen?" he asked.

"The training grounds are military property," Glen called from his own carriage. "It'll probably be in the map key."

It was, and Harry soon found what he was looking for to the south of the map. About one mile out of Dumfries, on the map, was marked a small section of land that was coloured in with orange stripes. The map keyed this as 'military training facility', and nothing more.

"We need the road south out of town then," Harry whispered, just as an ear splitting cry sounded throughout the night, reverberating for miles across the silent countryside. "Shit..."

"Shit, indeed," agreed Dermas. "What the hell was that?"

Harry was shaking his head. "Haven't a clue, but it didn't sound friendly. Let's get the job done and get out of here. I'm not in the mood for any of this tonight."

With a few quick instructions, Harry got the Thestrals moving again, heading for the south entrance to the town and the land beyond that. They never heard that scream again, and perhaps that was a good thing.

\*\*\*\*

The creature which had lived all the time of Existence within the darkness of the space between universes screamed with uncontrolled anger as it picked up the scent of the living through the hole in its



sheet of dirty hot metal upon the earth at their feet in a matter of seconds.

"I'll go first - everyone follow. I'm not entirely certain about that cry we heard earlier, and we should stick together."

Harry took the lead and was followed by Tonks, Glen, Jennifer, Dean, Sophia, and Dermas - who was keeping a hand on his sword just in case. The ground beneath their feet was heavily gravelled and completely open all the way to the buildings. They were bathed in light from the massive torches upon the roof of the nearest buildings and their shadows stretched in four directions around their bodies.

Everyone but Glen and Harry had drawn their wands, rightly feeling nervous and apprehensive. Harry's palms were faintly aglow though, he was ready for anything. As was to be expected, the seven of them arrived at the first building without incident. The door required a key card, to be swiped in a special slot, to gain entry.

"They wouldn't keep weapons in the barracks, would they?" Harry asked, looking at the plastic sign nailed to the wall - Barracks-A.

"Unlikely," agreed Glen. "We should look for a building marked 'Armoury', or something like it. 'Storage', perhaps."

Harry nodded and led the group around the side of that large, grey concrete windowless building, gravel crunching underfoot. It was dark and silent in the world around them, and for all they knew they could be the last people alive on this world - it was a scary thought because it could be true.

The next building was similarly locked with a key card slot, though that wouldn't stop Harry's magic, and marked 'Administration'. They moved on in single file, stopping only once so Dermas could relieve himself in the darkness.

Two buildings later and they arrived at a smaller one that resembled more of a warehouse than anything else. There were several big metal grilles running down the front of this building, much like that on a garage. A few lights were on here and one highlighted a sign they had travelled a hundred miles to see.

## ***WEAPON/VEHICLE STORAGE***

### ***CODE 4 ACCESS REQUIRED***

"Looks promising...." commented Dermas. "What's the bet that it's open?"

Harry moved forward and knelt down in front of one of the large metal grilles. He could see the silhouette of a large vehicle inside the building, and light shone behind the warehouse so several crates and boxes were highlighted as well. He gave the grille a pull on the off chance it'd be open. It wasn't.

"Well I definitely think what we came for is in there," he said. "And taking it wouldn't be wrong, considering the circumstances... so...

"*REDUCTO!*" Harry bellowed, his palms glowing with a deep white light that turned crimson in the form of a beam.

The red beam of magic hit the garage grille and blew a hole wide enough for them to get their carriages in if needs be, but it would probably be easier to levitate the gear to them. Flaming metal fell to the ground around the door, and Harry stepped over that with care and entered the weapons warehouse.

It was dark inside, too dark, so Harry sent up half a dozen large balls of light magic to float in the air above their heads, casting a pale circle of light in a forty foot radius. It didn't take long to find what they needed.

"Oh yeah, this is it," Glen said with a smile, remembering his own SAS days, perhaps.

Parked in the centre of the warehouse were four large military vehicles. They were armoured green, nine-seater with a lot of trunk space, ATVs (All Terrain Vehicles). Very impressive, but not what Harry and the others were after.

Sitting on wooden crates were several larger wooden crates, lining the east wall near the trucks. Harry sent out balls of light to highlight what was written upon the side, and was not disappointed.

Along the side of the first row of crates, this was burnt into the wood.

**5.56**  
**INDIVIDUAL**  
**SA80 WITH SUSAT**

**MN**  
**WEAPON**

**L85AI**  
**(IW)**

"Ah," smiled Glen. "Cattle shooters. Carries a thirty round magazine, weighs about ten pounds, made right here in the UK. We should definitely grab one or two crates of them."

Harry nodded and did just that, levitating six crates down to the ground at their feet. "According to the box there are fifteen weapons in each crate, so I doubt we'll need much more than that, but we should look around anyway."

"Right you are, Harry," Dermas said.

They left the six wooden crates holding the L85AI on the hard ground and moved on down the line of crates, Glen practical bouncing on his old heels. Half a minute later Glen called a stop.

"Sidearms," he smiled. "Grab a few of these, Harry."

Without question, Harry levitated another six crates to the ground. These were smaller and lighter, marked with this,

**9MM**  
**SELF-LOADING**  
**PISTOL**

**MODEL**

**.92FS**

Once those crates were down they continued down the line of racks holding the weapon crates. Glen was mumbling under his breath about the previous guns. "Fifteen round magazine, light weight... effective close quarters."

"I don't think we'll need much more," Harry said as Glen stopped again. "Make this the last bunch."

Old Glen Thomas nodded. "Yeah... people are crazy enough. We don't need to throw too many guns into that mix. Grab a couple of these, Harry, and we'll move back to the carriages."

Harry agreed and it only took him half a minute to levitate a final half dozen crates to the ground. These weapons were,

### **5.56 MM STEYR AUG**

"Used by the Australians lately," Glen said speculatively. "Forty two round magazine, weighs about nine pounds, good range... scope equipped."

"Eighteen crates should be enough," Jennifer said, her hair deep orange. "Especially after we've made some modifications to these weapons."

"Modifications?" asked Glen, as Harry picked up four of the cases with levitation spells, one on top of the other.

Jennifer shrugged. "Aurors like to customise their weapons, given the chance, and I believe we can benefit from a Muggle/Wizard weapon. A few small charms to increase rate of fire, silencing, weight reduction, energy blasts. They should still work in Muggle hands, as an enchanted object."

Glen nodded, he understood. "Doesn't sound too bad," he said.

Harry cleared his throat. "Let's get these crates back to the--"

A terrible, and heart wrenching cry went up in the night - one of misery, pain, fear and regret. It was the Thestrals, Harry knew, and dropped the crates. Something was attacking their transport.

"WAIT HERE," he cried, just as the others were beginning to react. Harry was nothing if not quick of the draw.

Not waiting for a response, Harry ran from the warehouse palms alight and battle on his mind.

*I've got you a birthday present*, Allarius had said. Harry didn't like to think what he might find back at the carriages.

He was still a building away when the smell hit him - burning flesh and wood. The Thestrals and carriages were in flames, he realised that much - but what had caused it?

Harry rounded the corner of the building marked BARRACKS-A and stopped in his tracks, coming to an abrupt halt and falling over backwards onto the gravel, cutting his palms open.

Standing with half a Thestral in its grip, about one hundred feet away near the smoking remains of the carriages, was a beast so hideous that it was the final, clinching proof that God may no longer have control over his creation.

*That God may have died and left all us kids to play on the road unwatched.*

Harry saw through wide eyes that it stood at least twice his height, had about a dozen bloated eyes, a third useless leg and rough blotchy skin that stunk even from where he lay. The beast had killed all of the Thestrals and, Harry could see, was drinking their blood.

Now, most people might have turned to run at this point, but not Harry. Pulling himself to his feet, Harry summoned the blue fire into his palms and watched as it encased his arms up to the elbow, his veins running blue further up his arm. He looked from that to the thing eating the Thestrals, and began to move forward.

"HEY!" he shouted as the second carriage collapsed in on itself in a cloud of black smoke and greasy flames. "UGLY! OVER HERE!"

The creature whirled, throwing the Thestral away without a second thought. The carcass spun on the gravel and came to rest as a dead lump fifty feet away. Upon seeing Harry, the creature cried in fury, pure fury, and charged.

Harry took a deep breath and prepared to unleash his power. He noticed with growing horror that with each step this monster took the

ground burst into flame beneath its feet. It was quite a thing to see gravel burst into flame, but there was no time for that now.

"Come on then, ugly," he whispered, and when it was barely fifteen feet away he thrust his arms forward.

Electrical fire surged forward destructively in a thousand bolts of pure power. They rippled and surged across the creature's chest, and as Harry cried out he pounded the monster twice his size into the ground, driving blue power into and through its hideous chest - pinning it to the ground.

He kept his power flowing into the beast and approached slowly, breathing through his mouth to avoid the worst of the thing's stink. It screamed and writhed on the ground, but couldn't break free of Harry's power.

"POTTER!" it cried.

Harry heard the hate in that voice, and knew this beast would kill anyone and anything to get to him. He would destroy it first, disgusted that it could speak through the hole in its chest. Its voice sounded deep, throbbing, as if it were gargling liquid - blood.

"What are you?" he whispered. *A birthday present...*

"Potter...." it gurgled now, its blood seeping out and staining the white gravel. "Allarius..."

"Sent you to your death," Harry growled. "What are you?"

"De.... Demon," its deep throbbing voice broke and its chest burst into green flames. "One of many... you'll soon be seeing more of us.... Potter."

It died and Harry incinerated the corpse just to make sure. The once quiet night returned to its silence, the landscape also lit up now by a trail of flames running back into the darkness of the forest a mile or two away.



He turned, feeling a little worse for the wear, and met the amazed and frightened faces of Glen, Dermas, Sophia, Tonks, Jennifer, and Dean.

"What was that, Harry?" Glen found his voice first.

Harry walked back over to his friends, shaking his head slowly. His arms were still glowing faintly blue as he spoke. "A messenger," he said. "And not the last."

"It was hideous," breathed Tonks. "It... it wasn't a magical creature?"

Harry continued to shake his head. "No," he said. "Something... deeper... than that."

Dermas cleared his throat, still looking at the charred lump of stinking flesh that was the demon. "How are we going to get back to Hogwarts now? We can't walk it...."

Harry had already thought about that, as soon as he'd seen the destroyed carriages, actually. "Glen," he said, "could you drive one of those trucks in the warehouse?"

Glen was looking at Harry as if he had never seen him before. Like a man who has discovered magic for the first time. He sighed inwardly, and then spoke. "I reckon," he said. "Stick shift, just a lot bigger than anything I've driven before. Might need a few minutes practice..."

"Go for it," Harry nodded. "We'll prepare the crates while you do it."

Back inside the warehouse, Glen Thomas climbed behind the wheel of one of the large nine-seater ATVs, easing it in for his height and weight. The keys were hung in the ignition, which he found odd but didn't have time to question now. To his right he saw Harry and the others piling the crates up on top of each other, ready to be moved into the back of the truck.

Taking a deep breath, he turned the key in the ignition. The green truck roared to life and Glen pressed the clutch down to put it into First. He applied pressure on the accelerator at the same time, a bit

too much, and rolled three feet before stuttering to a stall - the large engine jumping under the bonnet of the vehicle.

"Oops," he whispered, glancing sheepishly at the others, and tried again.

Once more the engine roared to life, running smoothly and almost silently. Shaking the gear stick, Glen was more careful this time and eased the large truck forward and out through the twisted and broken grille that Harry had made an entrance out of. No key card required there.

Outside under the night sky on the gravel road, Glen managed three laps of the warehouse without stalling, and felt confident in his driving abilities. It had been a decade or so since he'd last driven, and he was hot with nerves for this time, but some things were just like riding a bike. He brought the truck to a stop just before the metal grille of the garage entrance, and reversed back into the building with excellent precision.

The eighteen weapons crates, plus one or two more with extra ammunition in, were loaded into the back of the truck. The trunk space wasn't big enough for them all, so Harry strapped two crates into the spare seats inside the truck, and put some on the floor as well.

With the body of the truck several inches closer to the ground, Glen pushed it into First and tapped the accelerator. With little effort, the army vehicle pulled back out into the night, headlights shining complete with six passengers and enough weapons to... well, to last.

They drove out passed the still steaming corpse of the creature, and Harry's stomach turned at the sight of it.

*You're like a kid with a box of matches, Potter,* Allarius said from within the Boundary. *You start fires you can't put out.*

*How did that thing get here?* he asked.

*I sent it through, no harm in you knowing that. And it's only the first one, oh yes, plenty more where he came from.* Allarius laughed and screamed in Harry's head.

Harry was thinking fast. *You broke through the Boundary?*

*The damage is now so extensive I tore right through it with a thought, and will again.*

*Then I could leave early, and take care of you sooner....* Harry smiled.

*Nope, Allarius stated. Don't work like that, partner. It's a one way trip for now--see ya real soon though.*

"We should be back at the castle in about two and a half hours," Glen said from up front, turning out onto the road back through Dumfries. "Shame about those animals though."

"Hagrid's not going to be happy," Dean sighed. "He'd raised those Thestrals since birth."

"I just hope we don't run into anything like what killed them," Tonks shuddered, her hair changing from green to black.

"We won't," Harry assured them, and said no more.

The drive back to Hogwarts was a quiet and uneventful one. They only had to make one stop about three quarters of the way there, following the same road that had brought them this far south, and that was at a Muggle Fuel Station - deserted - to fill up the truck's tank with diesel.

They had to avoid the parked traffic on the way back, but eventually they turned off onto a dirt road that led to the remains of Hogsmeade, and beyond that the road to Hogwarts castle. As they drove through what used to be the main street of the wizarding village, the lights of the castle could be seen.

It was early morning - near four o'clock - and most would still be asleep. The guard would be about to change though, and Glen knew

they'd have to approach carefully. The Aurors were all anxious and nervous. A stray curse wasn't out of the question.

But his fears were unfounded, and after the Aurors had checked them all over - impressed with their vehicle - they waved them through. A few of the electrical systems on the truck's dashboard ceased working as they drove over the Hogwart's boundary - like the clock and radio - but the engine kept running and Glen drove it silently right up to the castle entrance doors.

"Hell of a thing seeing the country in that state," Glen said, turning off the engine and leaning back in his seat with a sigh. "Nothing on the radio either," he continued, tapping the black box on the dashboard. "Tried for hours on the way up."

"We're on our own, but keep that to yourselves," Harry began. "Three thousand people are living on hope over there," he pointed towards the houses by the lake. "Let them realise what's happened slowly on their own."

"You sure that's the best idea?" Dermas asked him, stepping out onto the castle driveway.

"We don't want a panic," Jennifer said. "I agree with, Harry."

"It'll do for now," Harry replied. "Now let's get these crates up to the Room of Requirement."

Pooling their magic, they levitated eleven of the twenty two crates up to the room and got the rest on the second trip. It had been a productive day.

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*August*  
*46 days until the Autumnal Equinox*

5<sup>th</sup>

Around the perimeter of Hogwarts castle the long high wall had been completed and reinforced with half a dozen protective and strengthening spells. At the base of the wall, following it around the perimeter, grew hundreds upon hundreds of powerful white roses -

that, for some reason, managed to negate the effects of the weather over Hogwarts.

The Hogwarts grounds had become an island in a bitter and unexpected snow storm that wasn't natural, even if it had been winter. Snow fell in torrents around the castle in a full circle radius. It piled up just on the line of the white roses and surrounded Hogwarts with six feet of snow on all sides within hours.

Not a flake of snow passed the boundary though, and thank God for that. It had been snowing almost constantly for eight hours and the only green in the entire land remained on the Hogwarts grounds. From the highest point in the castle one could look out and see nothing but a curtain of snow in every direction across the boundary. It was unbelievable, and probably meant their small community had grown as much as it ever would.

*Not many would have survived this blizzard.* The temperature on the castle grounds was just above zero, cold enough, and the snow was piled high in what had become a natural wall, creating a barrier between them and the outside world.

Harry watched the snow continue to fall from the window he had required in the busy and magic smelling Room of Requirement. It was the most snow he had ever seen in his life, and he knew he'd have to go out and tend to the rose's care this afternoon - if they died the snow would bury their community.

"Almost done on the sidearms, Harry," Glen Thomas said somewhere behind him.

Harry watched the snow a few moments more, regret and guilt upon his face, and then turned to the room - which had become a workshop over the last day and a half. Long benches scorched with magic and littered with tools and pieces of metal ran the length of the room. A dozen witches and wizards were busy casting spells and enchantments over Muggle weaponry and Harry was here to provide raw power for that extra kick.

Glen was holding a pistol towards the target that had been required against the far wall. A red circle. The black machine in his hand had

been modified quite moderately over the last day, and was the first real test of the weapons for the use of Muggles - in the defence of the castle. Harry wasn't stupid, he knew Voldemort was waiting out this storm.

"Go for it then," Harry said.

Glen nodded and took careful aim. His hands were old and slightly arthritic, but he didn't seem to have any problem with the gun. "Weighs almost nothing," he said. "Like a piece of paper or somethin'."

He pulled the trigger, and the paper target exploded in a ball of white light.

Harry's eyes widened with surprise and, sadly, approval. He didn't want to be doing this, but once again knew he rarely got what he wanted. The gun hadn't made a sound beyond a small hiss when it had been fired, and now Glen required another three targets and they met a similar fate as the first one.

Grace Arnair, Lily Potter, and half a dozen others that Harry didn't know watched with pride. They had done their work correctly, and it would be easy to copy the prints of that weapon into all of the others - with a few modifications on the whole.

"Want to give it a try, Harry?" Glen asked.

Harry was leaning against the wall and, with a sigh, walked over to Glen and took the weapon from him. He required a target and aimed, holding the sleek black object before him as if he had done it a thousand times before.

*Feels good, don't it? Allarius whispered in his mind. One more weapon for the pile. Do you even know who you are anymore?*

Harry ignored him, holding the light weight weapon and looking down the sight. Without hesitation, he pulled the trigger and the target exploded in a white haze. That white haze was the raw magic that had replaced the conventional metal bullets of the gun. It had been Tonks' idea, and it would serve them well.

The clip in the gun had been emptied and replaced with a magical core, the pure power required for it to last had been provided by Harry easily enough, and this charge of magic would fire small bursts of raw power for centuries before running dry. It was the perfect weapon for the Muggle guard.

"Oh well," Harry sighed, and gave the gun back to Glen. "Good job, guys."

Outside the snow still continued to fall unfalteringly and the world grew ever whiter. This storm covered almost fifty per cent of the entire planet, and was mirrored across every other world - in some it was worse - causing the death of billions upon billions. Harry found himself standing at the window again; the storm reflected in his tear stained eyes and felt the guilt of each and every death.

It was only going to get worse.

\*\*\*\*

#### *44 days until the Autumnal Equinox*

Atop of the Astronomy Tower at Hogwarts stands a lone figure. We see him as his black cloak blows around him in the wind, revealing the holster he wears on his right hip. Within this holster sits a black pistol, modified to be more lethal than ever intended, and in the figures pocket sits a trunk with half a dozen other similar weapons in it.

Grasped tightly in the boy's right hand is a long shaft of wood, a piece of wood with a feather in its centre - a phoenix feather. Up and down this boy we can see signs of battle, of weariness, of a life lived hard. He is scarred mercilessly... but he remains unbroken.

In this boy's eyes is the pain of the universes, and the weight of a billion deaths. This boy is unique, a survivor. He may not look like much if you were to pass him on the street, and yet he has seen and dealt with horrors we've never even heard of.

This boy's name is Harry Potter, as you probably know, and he has the potential to either destroy or save all of existence with a wave of his hand - if anyone knew it....

Around the castle Harry stands on is a world completely covered in ice and snow for hundreds of miles in every direction. Almost twelve feet deep and only now beginning to melt, it no longer surprises or scares Harry. He doubts anything would anymore.

Running through his mind are thoughts better left not heard now, as around him the world is growing thin, existence is growing thin. Think of it as a thin wall between Harry and the darkness of the Stream and Boundary. Here there be monsters, and to have them tear open the sky and fall upon the world would be devastating, to say the least - so we'll keep Harry's thoughts silent, lest they be heard by something undesirable.

Pointing his wand at the tip of his finger, Harry mutters a small cutting charm and breaks the skin on the tip of his left index finger. Round drops of crimson blood began to drip down to the earth, and Harry catches them with a well placed stasis spell. He catches about three thimble fulls of the red liquid, and has it float in the air before him.

*Blood magic requires blood, after all.*

Taking a deep breath and a step back, Harry focuses all his power into the wooden stick in his hand. He runs over the incantation within his mind, remembering it clearly from that final day in his own world, March 20<sup>th</sup>. It felt like a millennia ago.

*The world was silent as Harry and the Death Eaters alike waited for whatever end was coming. When Voldemort spoke, the strength in his words was so much that the air vibrated and they resounded off of every tree, every rock, for miles around.*

"TEMPUS AC CAPACITAS!"

*What happened next, Harry would remember for the rest of his life. All was completely an utterly silent for a long moment, and then a great and powerful roar erupted from the end of Voldemort's wand, with a blinding white light.*



*The light shot high into the heavens and reached the very clouds, lighting the area for miles around. Wave upon wave of power emanated from the light and the Death Eaters struggled to remain standing. Loose rocks and dirt from around the clearing were blown forcefully away.*

"One hell of a bad day...." Harry whispered, knowing he was about to repeat it. He was hoping beyond hope that the equinox rule would no longer be in effect, that somehow he could bypass it. It had gone on long enough, he had to stop it.

God, or whatever, was no longer in control, that much was obvious. So much death gone unnoticed. IT HAD TO END!

*"Tempus ac Capacitas..."* Harry whispered and his wand began to glow. *It's working, he thought. I'm gonna go home-*

It didn't work and Harry was blown back off his feet ten metres into the window on the balcony. He went straight through it, and landed in a pile of broken glass and splintered wood at the top of the stairs that led back down to the castle.

Harry, the survivor, didn't say anything. What was there to say? A silent tear, one from many, rolled down his cheek and he remained on his back for a good hour, staring pointlessly at the cloudy sky out through the window. The thunder and lightning outside sounded like mocking laughter to him.

\*\*\*\*

*40 days until the Autumnal Equinox*

Patrols of both Muggle and Magical guard walked the high wall around the Hogwarts perimeter. The ground before them was still piled high with snow, but it had begun to melt and run off towards the valleys nearby.

The Muggle guard each carried a magically enhanced rifle, capable of firing an infinite number of high powered energy blasts - for as long as the magical charge lasted in the clip. Several of the Aurors had

also seen these weapons tested, and were themselves carrying one or two.

There had been nothing to report for the three days the patrols had been active, nothing had been seen or heard of anyone or anything, including Voldemort. It was all quiet on the castle front.

Across from the wall by the lake slept three thousand people, comfortable in their well furnished rooms inside houses that were huge on the inside. Near the main castle doors the house elves were preparing breakfast for another day. It was only three in the morning, but breakfast for three thousand took hours to prepare. The elves never complained and likely never would.

Inside the castle many of its students slept comfortably enough in their dorm room beds, dreading another day of not knowing what was happening and suffering troubled sleep. None of them knew that the Dark Lord's army marched on Hogwarts.

None of the thirty two hundred people at Hogwarts knew they would be attacked within a few days. There was no way they could know, but that didn't change the fact.

The snow was the only thing keeping two hundred Death Eaters at bay and that was melting. The new weapons would get live testing sooner than all expected, save maybe Harry Potter. He knew in his life that he wouldn't go long without a fight. Evil would find a way to get to him in some form. It's what evil did.

So... how many times have we been here at the calm before the storm? Too many to count, but its enough.

One more last fight for this world and then the time will come for it all to be decided. We're beyond fate and destiny in these final days, Harry is beyond them. Nothing is certain, remember that.

\*\*\*\*

With thirty-eight days left before the Autumnal Equinox, the snow around Hogwarts was almost gone. The sky overhead was still

overcast with thick, heavy rolling black cloud, but all the snow was spent.

Around the perimeter patrol the Muggles and Aurors, vigilant in their guard and waiting nervously for the fight they know will soon be on their doorstep. Around the grounds and in the castle everyone else is also contributing in some way - whether it be picking up litter, cleaning the grounds they now lived in, or just listening to someone who needs to speak about their feelings and what happened, they are all contributing.

*Everyone is doing something, and that is important.*

Up in the castle a few classes have resumed for the students, both Magical and Muggle, today. Not all the Hogwarts professors had returned, perhaps they were dead, but Sirius Black and James Potter taught Transfiguration and Defence Against the Dark Arts respectively, and Severus Snape resumed Potions.

A few Muggles also took it upon themselves to teach the dozens of non-magical children, using a few classrooms as directed by Dumbledore. It was something to do, and it helped to keep the children's minds away from matters best left unthought at this point in the game.

All in all, Harry, Glen, and Dumbledore had scraped together the best defence possible for the small amount of days that had passed. Had it been left to anyone other than these three, it may not have gotten done - the wall certainly wouldn't have been built. In times of strife there are few you can rely on for protection, most are just out to survive themselves.

The weather, in and around Hogwarts was improving, by last week's standards at any rate. God knew what it was going to do next, perhaps nothing... maybe it had run itself out and was now just laying down in defeat and waiting for death. It was possible, these days anything was.

And as Harry Potter sat with his back against the wall in the field of roses he had created beneath the Astronomy Tower, his eyes gazing out at the world and feeling tired, he thought deep things - and

pondered the meaning of his life. Getting philosophical in his final days, perhaps, but then maybe he had the right to.

Harry had heard brief mutterings from Allarius over the last few days, and felt more than anything else that something big was on the horizon - perhaps the very reason for his surviving over the years. He seriously doubted he'd survived just to live a normal life--no, that wasn't for him no matter how much he may have wanted it.

He was a warrior of Light (and Dark), and to be so was to expect to do great things. Hadn't he already broken all the rules, even those of Death? Harry was prepared, he supposed, for whatever lay ahead. It had gotten to a point where everything began to make sense, and he was given a glimpse of a grand design, a plan that had been lain down for us all in the Beginning by a being that may not exist anymore.

*A God....*

The more he thought about it; Harry felt more than anything that God, if there was such a being, was either no longer in control, dead, or dying. No master, no matter how cruel, could watch His creation fall into chaos and ultimate ruin. And that thought felt right, beyond all else.

Evil be damned to Harry's stubbornness and single minded will never to give up, to never surrender, to always fight the good fight. Over time Harry would gain the attention of those in power, those who wielded universes as swords on their belts, and wrapped time around their little fingers. To be held in the gaze of such a being would drive one insane... like catching a glimpse of infinite, or even God Himself.

Such a thing would be a first, and more than beyond imagination. More than words or worlds could *ever* explain.

Oh well.

*One world at a time*, Harry thought, leaning back against the base of the tower. *I'll take it one world at a time....*

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## Chapter 20 - Birth of the Darkslayer

*One kills a man, one is an assassin;  
One kills millions, one is a conqueror;  
One kills everybody, one is a god.*

*~~Jean Rostand*

In the end, it is always the same.

*Always.*

When the fight starts, the battle, it usually only lasts for a few minutes. A few minutes of bloodshed for which fates are decided for eternity.

There is always heat in a battle, the battle sweat, the plague that drives the mind on to do inconceivable acts to protect your friends. In the end it always comes down to that....

You don't fight for values, for things such as your nation (or the nation's flag) You fight because your friend is fighting alongside you. Always the same, you fight to keep each other alive when an aggressor threatens to take all of that away.

Friendship is always on the side of the Light.

*Always....*

And in the end, it is always the same. Self sacrifice, one life for the rest or all lives for the one. It doesn't seem to matter, somehow, and can never be accurately portrayed with words such as these.

Fight as you will, in the end it always comes down to your *own* survival.

\*\*\*\*

Snow still laid knee deep outside of the Hogwarts grounds on August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1997. It laid knee deep in most places across the country and half of the northern hemisphere. Had anyone been around to know or care, millions of people had died in these snow storms.

One of the last, and largest, communities on the entire planet now stretched across the green, snow-free, expanse of the Hogwarts grounds. Three thousand people, three hundred and fifty of them guards upon the newly constructed high wall that circled the entire perimeter of the castle, now called Hogwarts home - as there was nowhere else...

One hundred and fifty of these guards were magical folk, Aurors equipped with wands and little else. Some had long, magically enhanced Muggle weaponry slung over their shoulders - as these weapons were a clear advantage - but the rest of the guard was made up of Muggles themselves.

Two hundred Muggles, some who only two weeks ago knew nothing of magic, also patrolled the ten foot high wall around the perimeter of the castle. These men and women were equipped with the same magically enhanced rifles and pistols as the Aurors, but felt much more confident with them.

It hadn't been hard, really, once one's mind was set to it, to mix both world's technology and magic into something twice as powerful. Several everlasting charms had been cast over each piece of machinery. Charms that had reduced the weight of the weapons, increased the rate of fire, removed the need for metal bullets and instead used raw magic as a projectile.

That raw magic had been provided by Harry Potter, who possessed a seemingly endless supply of pure power. The clips of the weapons had been emptied, and a small crystal carrying a magical charge that would last for centuries had been inserted instead. These crystals were the power source for the guns, which remained almost otherwise unaltered, and with each suppression of the trigger small balls of pure energy shot through the air and left a neat hole at least an inch wide in a target.

That said, next to none of the guard had ever fired a weapon before - and most still held onto the belief that they wouldn't have to fight. They were, of course, wrong.

The sun sank early on the evening of August 15<sup>th</sup>, earlier than expected for this time of year. A young Muggle, who had volunteered for the guard simply because it felt right, walked his patrol atop of the wall close to the large cast-iron gate that barred entry from the Hogsmeade road.

The Muggle boy's name was Will Skey, William to his mother, and resting in his arm was a light rifle, once a Steyr Aug - now a Muggle/Magic hybrid. In a holster upon his jeans belt sat another pistol hybrid - both only fired three times or so in target practice.

Will was a tall lad with long blonde-brown hair that hung to his shoulders on top of a muscular chest and pair of arms. Will wore glasses, but his vision was damn near perfect anyway - it was a depth perception problem, the doctor had said. The doctor was dead now, they all were.

Will was patrolling his patch of the wall alone for the most part, watching the Sun behind the castle sink lower over the horizon. It felt odd to be looking at lush, green grounds on one side of the wall, and to be looking at dead and barren snow covered land upon the other. The line of white roses was also disconcerting, it was a barrier that had more power and defence than the stone wall ever would.

On this particular evening, Will was thinking more about getting back to his room within the homes near the lake and getting something to eat than watching the road to Hogsmeade. He wasn't the only one on watch of this road, but he was the closest. If he jumped down off the wall he'd be on the road.

In his other life, as he was already calling three weeks ago, Will had been at college in Manchester, learning how to fly commercially. He had gotten little flight experience since his eighteenth birthday about two months ago, and thought now he likely never would get anymore. This job he had now was fun though, and sooner or later the weather had to improve - he thought he might stay on as a guard for whatever civilisation sprung up next.

Hey, it was an idea.



Will and many others hadn't been told much about what they were guarding the castle against, if anything.

"Chasing shadows...." Will had mumbled on more than one occasion, usually when the cool wind blew in off the snow and he wanted to be inside.

They didn't know what to expect, except to look out for people dressed in black cloaks, or creatures that were behaving oddly. Something called an Animagus or a dark creature - Will wasn't familiar with either term.

The last rays of sunlight were fading for another day, and the band of darkness had stretched down and hidden the mountain that towered above the remains of a village in darkness. Will thought he heard a cry of... delight, of something in the distance when this happened - but shrugged it off as his mind playing tricks on him.

The light faded so fast that Will thought he had blinked and missed it. He looked up and down the wall, and towards his home in the distance, and saw nothing out of place. There were a few of the blokes in charge walking back and forth along the length of the wall, but that was about it.

Another thing Will had noticed over the time he had spent on guard duty up by the gate, was that there entire force was spread thin around the perimeter of the castle. There couldn't have been more than twenty five men on and around the gate, and that was the largest group anywhere along the wall. If a big enough force attacked, they could be overrun before anyone else got there.

*Ah, he thought, but they might not have guns or any of that magic. You'll be alright.*

The darkness had spread now and they were beginning to light torches along the length of the wall. Hundreds of lights were on up in the castle and Will wondered, not for the first time, what he was doing out here. He looked up into the cloudless sky wistfully, wishing he was up in that flying any aircraft - he would love to be doing that.

A rustling amongst the nearby trees of the snow covered forest startled Will and he turned sharply, his hand already bringing up the automatic rifle he carried. He supposed that was a perk of being out here, he got to carry and sometimes fire a gun. The torches barely lit up the area for half a dozen feet beyond the wall, and Will could see nothing, and looking to his left and right he saw no one else had noticed anything either.

He turned back around, looked towards the houses by the lake tiredly, and was viciously bitten in the neck by two sharp fangs.

Will was lifted over the wall and into the darkness of the forest without making a sound, the gun falling silently from his hands and into a pile of soft snow at the base of the wall.

Further along the wall, another young Muggle boy stared in disbelief at what had just happened. He had seen... he had seen... Christ to bleeding mighty he had no idea what he had seen.... but he knew what he thought he saw.

This young man opened his mouth to scream and-

Two razor sharp fangs dug deep into the flesh of his neck, spilling his blood as cold hands worked their way across his chest. A small cry escaped the boy's lips and his weapon fell onto the smooth stone at his feet. There was a small whooshing sound and then everything went black for the boy, as he died in the forest alongside Will.

The game was up at that one though, even as all the recently lit torches began to blow out, as if by magic.

An Auror had seen and heard.

"VAMPIRES!" the cry went up, even as the entire wall and surrounding area was plunged into darkness as all of the torches mysteriously were extinguished.

The Auror, a woman named Nymphadora Tonks, ran towards the main gate, her wand already drawn. She passed several dark blurs in the night and sensed the confusion and fear, all heads craning

upwards as the beating of wings and the sharp cry of death was heard in the starry sky above them.

Creatures of the night, and plenty of them.

Tonks's hair turned the deepest shade of black and she fell to her knees as a pair of razor sharp claws hurried to silence her from above. "Not on your life..." she whispered, and pointed her wand directly towards the moon.

"*LUMOS!*" she cried.

Light, pure unnatural sunlight burst forth from the tip of the lone wand... and for just a brief moment several dozen dark blurs in the night sky overhead were illuminated and fear fell upon all of those who saw their pale faces, disfigured with blood stains and large, horrible fangs.

Half the Muggles who saw the creatures screamed and threw themselves onto the cold stone under their feet, their weapons forgotten in their fear as the Hollywood movies came to life right above their heads. Everything just got a whole lot more real.

The Aurors on the wall near the gate reacted as they had been trained to though, and soon half a dozen more bright lights joined Tonks's, and the vampires were driven off as they despised and hated the light.

"Bring up the guard!" cried Tonks. "Alert the castle."

Almost instantly cries for the guard to assemble on the gate raced down and up the length of the wall. Torches were reignited and Aurors kept their wands lit, using their other hand to swing up the only other weapon they had - the Muggle gun. 'Twas better than nothing.

A large red and gold flare also screamed high into the night sky, and there wasn't a single person in the castle who saw that that didn't know what it meant. *An attack!* The flare had been raised, the castle was under attack! The red and gold sparkling comet was really used to alert one person though, and he was already running towards the wall.

Tonks stood up with a rush of adrenalin and gazed out over the wall and now saw a line of torches moving and spreading out further down the Hogsmeade road. As she had been trained to do, she and ten others, sent streams of white light down in that direction. The light lit up the hoods and masks of the Death Eaters.

*Not killed in the storms then,* Tonks sighed.

"This is it," she heard someone cry.

"God, they're here!"

*Harry*, she found herself thinking, looking up into the sky where the vampires flew just out of range of the lights. Wizards and Muggles ran around her, some with purpose some without, and Tonks found herself thinking, as all would one day do:

*We need Harry. Someone has to come and help, and that's Harry.*

\*\*\*\*

Harry Potter stood in line at the long, granite kitchens built next to and running up to the castle from the lake. A hundred people stood in line with him, waiting to grab a parcel of food from the elves to either feed themselves or their families.

It was supper time at Hogwarts, as the sun sank early over on the horizon. *Early*, Harry thought, *too early*. It was just another complaint on the long list of complaints that was now Existence.

Harry moved a few spots forward in the line and picked up a bottle of pure water. He noticed with little care that many were avoiding him in the line, and that there was actually a two person gap on either side of him. He was an anomaly amongst normal people, and those around him either knew or sensed that.

Shrugging indifferently, mostly to himself, Harry picked up a ceramic dish containing rice with a side of beef and gravy - if he had ever been on an aeroplane, he would have recognised the economy class food. It was identical right down to the smell that only airlines seem to manage. Coincidence or torture? Fine line between the two.

*The sun really is sinking fast*, he thought once he had picked up a plastic fork. Already the wall was only partway visible and that was fading.

Shrugging again, Harry pulled the aluminium top off his food, thanked the elves much to their enjoyment, and dug in half-heartedly. He never much felt like eating nowadays, his appetite had been shot off in some battle or another. But he knew it was necessary, and so... food on!

Stepping out of the line for the ice cream dessert, Harry began the walk back up into the castle. There was a meeting tonight in the Room of Requirement now that the snow had melted heavily, so he'd eat fast and the head on up there.

His white polo shirt, one of the two he owned in this world, blew around him in the breeze. Harry barely felt that for the basilisk armour that covered his chest. Sometimes he forgot he was wearing that armour, it was so light and yet so strong.

It was dark now, and the torches hanging outside the castle sprang to life as he stepped off the grounds and onto the driveway. The Entrance Hall was only about a hundred feet away and he could feel the warmth of the castle from where he stood.

*Early night tonight*, he thought. *That would be good.*

There was an itching on the back of his neck, and Harry put his bottle of water on the ground while he scratched it. As he did, he chanced a look down at the wall and castle gates for no other reason than it felt right to do so. He saw that the torches had been lit, and wouldn't be extinguished until the following morning.

Coughing, Harry swallowed some dry rice and then picked up his bottle of water. He turned away from the wall just as the first of the torches began to die - Will Skey was dead by this point.

*Going to be a long meeting tonight*, he thought sadly. He hated these meetings and wished Voldemort would hurry up and attack. At least then he could be doing something he knew, and that was fighting.

As he approached the castle steps, he saw a group of familiar strangers exit the castle and knew he couldn't avoid them.

"Harry?" Ron Weasley said, running a hand back through his shocking ginger hair. He had his arm around Hermione, and next to the pair walked Ginny and Neville, hand in hand.

"Hello," Harry said, swallowing a chunk of meat. "Em... how's things?"

"They're fine, mate," Ron said, with only a moment's hesitation. "We were just heading over to the wall to see what time Fred and George, there my brothers, get off tonight. We were thinking of having a small gathering in the common room. Want to head down there with us?"

Harry stared at all of them for a few moments, mostly at Ginny and at that point his heart seemed to shrink. Months if not years of practice kept his face impassive though, and he was shaking his head and turning towards the wall before Ron had even finished asking his question.

"Better not," he began, turning to the wall. "There's a meet-"

An enormous red and gold sparkling comet shot high into the air, and the five teenagers stood staring for just a moment, before one of them threw his food to the ground and broke out into a run towards the light.

The others, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville, were still staring uncomprehendingly at the light as Harry began his run, and it was a few seconds before any of them realised what it was. At this point Harry was already several metres away and not stopping.

"An attack...." Hermione breathed. "But.... but...."

"We should go and help," Ron said, and began to follow Harry.

"Are you crazy!?" Ginny exclaimed and put a hand on his shoulder. "We'll just get in the way."

"Fred and George are up there, Gin," Ron said, shaking off her hand. "We can't-"

"What can we do?" Neville cut in. "Gin's right. We should let Harry handle it."

"Bollocks," Ron stated. "That's my family. You can stay, I'm going."

And without another word, he was off following Harry's trail. It was dark on the grounds and he could no longer see Harry, but he could see the red and gold (Gryffindor colours) warning comet, and headed for that. Of course, the other three teenagers gave chase.

Harry ran with the wind in his ears and one thought upon his mind. *This is it!* As if he had been waiting for this moment, and he supposed he had, adrenalin flooded his system and he practically *flew* down the grounds towards the wall and the source of the light.

He could see, through his healed if not mismatched eyes, that the guard upon the wall was relighting the torches. He wondered for a moment why they had been extinguished, and thought he could see dark blurs moving in the sky overhead the wall. *What was-?*

No time for it now, he was fast approaching the wall. He could see, stretching from the lake and over to the edge of the forest on his left, dozens of pinpricks of light moving towards the gate - Aurors and Muggles moving up just as they had been instructed to do.

*Good*, he thought. *We can do this....*

Half a minute later and Harry was leaping up the stone stairs on the side of the wall near the large cast iron gate that guarded the Hogsmeade road. He could hear shouts of confusion, some of fear, and some commands from atop the wall and - again for no other reason than it felt right - he called the sword of Gryffindor into his right hand.

The mythical blade glinted red and gold in the light of the still sparkling comet hanging in the air, and the jewels along the hilt sparkled just as bright. The infinitely sharp edge Harry kept before him just as Dermas had trained him to do, and all the while he assessed the situation.

The wall had been built so four large men could walk abreast on top of it, and Harry saw that the first three lines had been formed shabbily above the gate and about forty feet in each direction, left and right, making a length of men about fifty strong. He saw more running in from the end of the wall near the lake, and from the end that disappeared around the side of the castle.

As was to be expected, a battle hardened Auror was forming the lines at their head, and Harry headed towards her with his blade held high for all to see. His wand was strapped to his wrist but that was of little use.

Overhead he could hear the flapping of wings, but that sound barely registered at all. There was a pool of blood on the white stone as well that stood out like a sore thumb. Harry wondered if they had taken casualties already.

"FORM THE LINES!" Tonks cried. "HOLD TH- HARRY!"

Harry moved to the front of the wall and looked out upon the Hogsmeade road and the surrounding flat land near the edge of the trees. He saw lines of torchlight moving towards them, black cloaks and hoods.

*Righty-o then*, he thought, an insane smile spreading across his face. It was his time to shine.

He turned back to the Auror and Muggle lines and saw with some confusion that a handful of Aurors were pointing their wands straight up, firing beams of light into the star shot sky.

"What's going on?" he asked Tonks as he drew level with her, the lines standing just to his right. The sword of Gryffindor reflected all of the light, lighting it up like a diamond in the sun. It was almost dazzling.

Tonks glanced curiously at the sword, but then gave Harry a full report. "Death Eaters, two hundred maybe - and no sign of Voldemort. There are also dark creatures... how many we're not sure, but there are at least two dozen vampires above us right now."



"Vampires?" Harry said, looking up and feeling a tingling sensation across his throat. "First time for everything...." he mused. At least he could now make sense of the Aurors with their wands pointed skyward.

Without even thinking about it, Harry's left palm glowed and he held it skyward as well. One after the other, fifteen balls of magic roughly the size of bludgers formed and floated up like balloons. They lit the sky above their heads better than any wand ever could. Briefly Harry saw a dozen pairs of decayed flapping wings and heard the screech of the undead as they fled from the light.

They beat their wings hard, buffeting wind full of their stink down upon the wall. Harry sent up another dozen lights for safe measure and then watched the vampires fly back as dark blurs in the night sky over to the approaching Death Eater lines.

"Well that's them sorted for now," Harry said, addressing Tonks and a handful of others nearby. The leaders of the army, some Muggle some not - all were carrying rifles. Harry glanced briefly down at the pistol on the side of his leg, and then decided he preferred the sword. "It's a bit cold out here...."

"What's the plan, sir?" asked a man that was at least three times Harry's age.

Harry shrugged, wishing he was wearing a jumper. It was really cold. He looked down to the row of white roses beside the wall, on the Hogsmeade side.

Without really thinking about it, he said,

"Protect the roses, with your lives if needs be." He blinked in surprise.

"Sir...?" the man said, rubbing the coarse stubble on his chin. "The roses, sir?"

Harry shook his head. "Probably best not, aye. Just hold the lines for now. When they get closer we'll see what happens.... be prepared to use those guns. Make sure everyone knows this is real, not a game..."

"Very well," the man and two others moved off down the lines, disappearing in and out of torchlight.

"You feeling okay, Harry?" Tonks asked, her eyes sharp blue and hair still the deepest black.

No...

"Yeah. Bit pissed off I missed dinner for these bastards," he waved his hand at the approaching Death Eaters. "But let's get it over with.... it really is cold."

"It's not that bad," Tonks shrugged - she was wearing robes but still she was a little warm in the summer heat.

Harry paused for a moment, and his tired eyes - eyes that had seen almost everything - scanned the dark forest and road quickly, fearing the worst. It was too cold...

Hedging his bets, Harry took a deep breath and drew his wand with his left hand, holding the sword before him still. He looked back into the darkness of the forest, a darkness that seemed to be deepening and then at the barely visible deeper shadows ahead of the Death Eaters on the Hogsmeade road....

*Ginny.*

"*EXPECTO PATRONUM!*" he roared, making everyone nearby jump and the Muggles scream when Prongs leapt forth from his wand.

Warmth, expected and needed, flooded Harry's cold body and then the stag was off, floating down silently, majestically, through the night air towards the nearest Dementor - for there were at least ten close by. Close enough for Harry to be effected anyway.

Tonks and the others gasped as the Dementors, hooded in black and pale decomposing flesh gleaming, were highlighted against the darkness - both on the road and in the surrounding forest.

"My God..." Tonks breathed. "They would have been right alongside the wall before we noticed them."

Harry sighed, holstering his wand as Prongs tore into a Dementor - lighting up that part of the ground at least. "That's why I'm here..." he whispered, looking down into the gleaming blade he held in his hand.

*God he hated this crap.*

The Death Eater force had perhaps advanced halfway down the road, still a good few hundred feet away, when three or four other patroni were cast out into the night - the silver animals finding the Dementors easily enough, and sending them back into the darkness.

"Do we know if Voldemort's here?" Dermas Trask asked.

Harry turned to meet the blade master, noticing with respect that Trask had his sword drawn. He must have come on a run from the castle, as his brow was dripping with sweat. He wasn't that young anymore, after all.

"He'll be here," Harry said. "Probably cooking up something to get him past this wall. It ends tonight, though."

"Well I guess it's what we've been waiting for...." Trask sighed. "Are they vampires?"

Harry chuckled, something that sounded more insane than anything else. "Oh yeah," he turned his sword and it reflected for a brief moment the last silver sparks from Prongs, before the stag dissipated.

*I reckon you might need that head of yours looked at, son,* Allarius cackled, once again speaking up from wherever he was at the most inopportune moment.

*I wouldn't be the only one,* Harry replied with a mind-laugh of his own.

*Oh, Harry,* Allarius sighed, *how cutting! Go fight this war you will never fully win....*

"You're in command, Harry," Tonks was saying. "What are the orders?"

Harry thought she sounded nervous, but he supposed that was to be expected.

"We've all been here before," he said, his voice deep and serious. He turned to look at the nearest Muggles and Aurors, as well as all the others nearby. The lines were silent now, and his voice carried well. "Most of us anyway... this is real, kill or be killed. I want the first line of those with rifles to kneel and take aim."

Hesitation from the Muggles, who had lived normal lives up until a few weeks ago, but the Aurors led the way. Getting down on one knee all along the length of the wall, fifty or so men and women raised their weapons in a conical line at the approaching Death Eaters.

Harry placed the sharp tip of his sword onto the smooth stone next to his feet, and began to spin the sword under the palm of his hand, digging a small groove into the freshly laid stone of the wall. His eyes were on this dusty hole, even as the army approached. He got caught in the spinning of the blade, and had to shake his head to clear it.

"I don't feel like I'm here...." he whispered, and no one else heard him.

Even though his thought went unheard, it didn't change the fact. Frowning as if on the verge of some discovery, Harry turned his head slightly to the left, and felt as if he was looking into another world - when what he really saw was a young Muggle girl with a gun. She had blonde hair and was trembling as the Death Eaters advanced.

Harry blinked, and the feeling disappeared - perhaps it had never been there, and his attention returned to the problem at hand.

"....seven long," he only heard the last few words of what Tonks had said.

"I -er- didn't catch that," he said, resting the blade against his shoulder.

Tonks frowned, and Harry sensed her frustration. "I said," she said. "There's about twenty seven to a line, probably about ten lines - and I

think Voldemort is moving to the centre...." she trailed away, catching the glimpse of something in all the growing torchlight.

Harry turned to follow her gaze, and jumped up onto the slightly raised barrier that half the Muggles leant their weapons against at the moment. This put him at least two feet higher than anyone else, and highlighted him like a Christmas tree. He saw what Tonks did.

The Death Eaters were close enough now that Harry could see the glints in their eyes, about one hundred and a bit feet away - thirty five metres or so - and in their centre a handful were moving away, and a darker figure was walking out to the front, cutting a path through the snow.

It was the Dark Lord - a weaker version of him, anyway. Tom Riddle strode onto centre stage, looking for all the world like he owned it.

Silence, even the flapping of the decomposed, hole filled wings of the vampires ceased as the creatures themselves settled into the dark branches of the trees lining the sides of the road. It was a silence broken only by the twirling of Harry's sword, again grinding a hole into the stone on top of the wall. He still stood on the barrier, high above anyone else.

*Defiance until the last breath, until the last drop of blood.*

"HOGWARTS!" the Dark Lord bellowed above the constant twirling of Harry's blade. His eyes connected with the youth's, and Harry smiled when he saw the uncertainty reflected there. "YOU WILL SURRENDER!"

The Death Eaters had stopped moving behind their Lord, and their torches flickered in the small wind. The snow about their feet had been reduced to slush, and the vampires hissed into the night from their shadows.

"Okay," Harry replied. "Just hold on a minute, I'll get the door."

Harry moved towards the iron gate lever as if he did indeed intend to open it. "Harry," Tonks whispered. "What are you doing!?"

Harry spoke calmly, quietly. "When I give the signal, open fire on them - all of you," he looked into the Muggle's eyes. "Don't hesitate... it's either you or them."

"YOU ARE MOCKING ME, BOY!" Voldemort roared, brandishing his wand and cutting through the air.

Harry jumped back and forth along the wall, from his higher vantage point, as if he didn't have a care in the world. "YES, I AM!" Harry shouted, and then flicked his hand towards a nearby pile of snow.

In the blink of an eye a small ball of snow flew up into Harry's hands. Still smiling insanely, he took careful aim and then shot it through the air with his mind towards Voldemort. It hit the Dark Lord square in the shoulder, and he took a step back.

Disbelief was probably the strongest feeling at that moment.

"DEATH WILL BE A RELIEF WHEN I'M FINISHED WITH YOU!" Voldemort roared, his eyes blazing with the fires of two hot furnaces.

No longer wasting any time, Harry thrust his sword down into the stone at his feet. The infinitely sharp blade tore through the stone as if it were dirt, and stood proudly in the stone, buried a foot from the hilt. Still moving, Harry drew the pistol that hung in the holster on his right side, and opened fire.

*Two, three, five, eight* balls of energy exploded almost silently from the barrel of the gun. Harry's aim was true, his first four shots were in line for Voldemort's chest and head, but were stopped dead in the blue ripples of a shield charm protecting the Dark Lord. The other four energy balls shot passed Voldemort and two of the Death Eaters behind him fell.

Had Harry given a damn, which he didn't, he had just killed Avery and Rosewood.

And that was the signal for it to begin.

The Death Eaters and Voldemort raised their wands as one, the Killing Curse forming on over fifty pairs of lips at once. Harry jumped

down off the wall, leaving his sword for a moment, and shouted, "FIRE!"

Of the first line of Aurors and Muggles, forty or so men and women, some barely adults at all, only fifteen actually did open fire. Fear, inexperience, revulsion, and perhaps just an inability to fight stayed the hands of the rest. All who hesitated were Muggles, and that explained everything. A few weeks ago many of these people worked ordinary lives - free from magic, from war, from vampires.

Of those who did fire, not a one aimed for Voldemort. In the space of four seconds, seventy small spheres of energy erupted from the muzzles of the weapons and tore through the air towards the enemy. Some hit the trees and exploded, some missed entirely and the light shot away into the night, leaving a long silvery trail of sparks in its wake.

Twelve Death Eaters fell under that wave, twelve who had the Killing Curse on their lips, but those Death Eaters behind them, in the second and third lines, those who didn't have a clear shot at the wall, were already raising shield charms to protect their number.

Dozens of the bright shining spheres of death impacted against these shields and sent ripples of power across their length. Blue light lit up the night for a brief moment, and Harry counted several dozen dark shapes in the trees nearby and further down the road. Vampires, and moving in closer.

Harry barely heard it, let alone sensed it, but there was now a vampire above him, several in fact. His lights had dimmed and faded overhead and the creatures had moved back in. Green light shone from the Death Eaters and Voldemort, white light from his lines, and the sounds were like thunder claps. He heard the whooshing of wings though, and looked up just as one sharp taloned foot slashed open his cheek.

Cursing but already alert, Harry dropped to the ground, his pistol clattering away into the fray, and the creature fell on top of him - snarling and lunging for his neck. Fear is ingrained into humans to help them stay alive, and Harry felt the urge now... not fear, precisely, but adrenalin--fight or flight, he chose the former.

Growling himself, Harry wrestled atop of the wall with the vampire, a male by the looks of him. Pale skin that looked like chalk and stained red fangs and lips made the monster look hideous. It hissed and snarled like a snake, screeched like a bat and Harry saw that its eyes were dead.

"You dare stand against the Lord of the Dark!" it screeched, and tore at Harry's chest, its razor sharp claws tearing his shirt to shreds. They were stopped on the basilisk armour though, which remained undamaged.

Vaguely, only just taking notice, Harry saw other vampires had descended on the lines, and that the Aurors were hard put to it to keep them off the Muggles, many of whom were firing now - some were cowering in fear.

And then there were the Killing Curses finally being fired from the Death Eater lines.

On the ground as he was, Harry couldn't see over the slightly raised wall in front of him, but he could see the glimmer of green light in the visible blade he had left in the stone, and over the horizon of the wall. The first curses impacted against the front of the wall, destroying large chunks of the stone and reducing it to dust. This dust rained down upon the white roses beneath it, some of which were in flames from the curses.

*The roses were screaming, Harry heard them ringing in his head.* Each rose that died felt like a blow to his stomach, but he persevered. Some of the curses made it over the wall, and several fighters were blown back as the light impacted into their chests, throwing them onto the snow-free grounds on the other side of the wall.

Harry got his hands around the throat of the vampire, he could smell blood on its breath and the decay of its powerful wings, flapping in the wind. The creature was stronger than he was, magic and the Dark had made it so - but Harry wouldn't give up.

Slowly though, and against his will, the fangs of the slaving monster drew nearer his neck - not to bite and suck his blood - but to rip his throat clean off.



"You will join the legion of the dead!" the vampire hissed.

"The Hell I will!" Harry replied, and let go of the vampire's throat with his left hand.

The creature was bare-chested, and Harry placed his palm flat on its stomach. He shuddered at the wave of revulsion that swept through him, and concentrated. Blue electric-fire burst forth from his palm, and the monster simply disintegrated from the stomach down.

Harry's jeans were covered in a slimy, red-green liquid as the top half of the monster shuddered and died for good this time, its dead eyes showing only a momentary flicker of surprise. Grimacing, Harry shoved the top half of the creature, wings and all, to the side, and pulled himself to his feet.

He looked around, saw people firing, some hiding, and--

A weight that felt like a sledgehammer collided with Harry's back, and he felt himself tumbling forward towards the raised edge of the wall. In a blur he turned and another vampire, female this time, clawed at him and screamed so loud he felt as if his ear drums would burst. He fell back onto the raised wall where he had stood a few minutes ago, and then it was on top of him.

Green Killing Curses still lit up the air around them, and Harry felt the wave of cold as one passed not three feet from where he lay exposed on the wall, with the vampire on top of him, once more going for his throat.

The roses below were still in flames, and Harry could feel the heat of them. He knew he was burning as well. With a monumental effort, Harry threw the vampire off him and made to stand up, but the creature flapped its wings once to remain floating in the air, and threw herself into him again.

Losing his balance, Harry fell backwards over the side of the wall, pulling at anything to stop his fall he got his hand caught in a decayed lump of the vampire's wing - and they both went head over heels down into the flaming white roses.

As they fell, half a dozen Killing Curses shot by them, missing by mere inches, and then they hit the ground hard - Harry's blow cushioned and lessened somewhat by his armour - crushing the burnt skeletons of the roses, and rolling into searing flames. His jeans aflame and the remnants of his torn shirt falling away, exposing the armour, Harry rolled out of the roses, cutting himself in several places on the thorns of those still standing, and into the cool snow, which doused the flames.

The vampire was still there though, as were several hundred Death Eaters and Voldemort himself. Lying in the snow, which was melting beneath him from the heat he was generating - both from the fire and the heat of the roses he felt - Harry struggled to catch his breath as the creature of the night fell on top of him again, clawing and biting at any part of him she could.

Dizzy from the ten foot fall and the pain of the roses, Harry had trouble summoning his blue power, and this delay caused the vampire to hook her long fingernail across his ear. There was a large piercing spike of white hot pain, and Harry grunted in surprise. Through watering eyes he looked up at the vampire just in time to see her throw away a small, sparkling object that had gotten hooked on her long talon.

*God...* Harry breathed. *She's pulled out that blasted griffin earring!* Blood flowed freely from the gash now in Harry's ear, falling down to cover his throat and seep in under his armour. It stained the remaining snow around him.

At the smell of the blood, the strength of the vampire on top of him seemed to treble. He was all but helpless beneath her, and the Death Eaters were advancing with Voldemort at their head. The wall was pockmarked and weakening under the constant barrage of green death - *Bugger*, Harry thought, *we're losing!*

Inches from his throat, blood stained fangs hung sharply with purpose and Harry had had enough. *Could really use some of that 'power the Dark Lord knows not' now*, he thought with a smile.

"This'll have to do," he almost sighed, and in his left palm a ball of electric blue fire sprang into existence.

Never hesitating, Harry balled his glowing hand into a fist, the blue magic encircling it and seeping between his fingers, and punched the vampire in her left cheek. There was a moment of resistance, but nothing more than that, and her head exploded in a flash of red and shock. Her fast decaying body fell limply to Harry's right, and he was already pulling himself to his feet - fist still glowing.

Despite all that had just happened, the only real injuries Harry had sustained were the cut in his cheek, and the gash in his ear. He glanced around on the ground for the golden griffin earring, but couldn't see it. With a shrug, he turned and faced the Death Eaters alone.

One hundred feet away, thirty metres or so, stood Voldemort and behind him another few feet was his army. It was dark on this night, and none of them had seen him - he didn't think - and he only thought this because he hadn't been struck dead yet, so he turned back to the wall.

Crushed and in flames, hundreds of roses lay dying or dead at the foot of the wall. The flames were spreading fast through the flowers, and a long line of green and red flames stretched for forty feet in both directions from the large iron gate. Harry felt sick just looking at it.

*No time now*, he thought - for weeks all he had had was time, and now he had none. *Irony is not without a sense of cruel humour.*

Gasping air, Harry ran back to the wall, curses and energy spheres flying back and forth above his head and to either side of him. He avoided stepping on any of the roses, if he could - for no other reason that it seemed right to do so, once again - and when he reached the wall he called forth his power.

"*Gravios!*" he whispered, remembering one of the last spells he had learnt when he was nothing more than a student at Hogwarts in his own world. Floating on the air, Harry rose and then removed the spell, stepping back down onto the fortified wall.

It was chaos up here - many Vampires, Muggles, and Aurors lay dead or wounded atop of the wall, some in flames and others cowering in fear beneath the small protection offered by the raised

parapet wall, the stone embankment protecting the soldiers from enemy fire. Others had fled; he could see them running for the castle. He thought of them no more, they were gone - and that was the end of it.

More Aurors and Muggles had arrived from further down the wall as he had been fighting on the other side of it, and the barrage upon the Dark Lord's forces went on with renewed vigour. Curses still impacted against the weakening stone and Harry could feel it crumbling beneath his feet. The wall was going to give way if he didn't turn the tide in this fight.

Vampires, still a fair few, grappled with the forces on top of the wall - some tearing out throats, which seemed to be the preferred tactic of these creatures, others pausing to drink the blood of their victims. Harry didn't hesitate when he picked up a nearby discarded rifle, the magic still hot within it, and blew the head clean off the nearest creature.

*Where the bloody hell did Voldemort find these things?* He wondered briefly, looking back out at the ever-approaching army. *Almost on top of us....*

"HARRY!" someone screamed. Harry wheeled about on the spot, bringing up his acquired rifle as if he had been using it all his life. He didn't suspect it then, but he had a natural affinity with most weapons, and more so weapons he had changed with his own magic. Holding the rifle felt like the most natural thing in the world.

Harry's eyes levelled with Nymphadora Tonks, and he smiled. She had been leading the guard, holding them here, while he had been occupied elsewhere. "Keep at 'em, Tonks," he called, caught in the flow of the battle and the heat in his system that accompanied that. She had a cut on her chin that was dribbling down her neck.

No sooner had he said that, than a long, sharp claw burst through Tonks's throat, impaling her upon the talon of the creature behind her, which slipped out of the shadow of darkness with blood all around its mouth.

Rarely shocked these days, Harry fired twice, two quick suppressions of the trigger, and six white energy spheres ripped apart the vampire's head. The bodies, both Tonks and the vampire, jerked and still stood for a few moments, and then fell onto the blood stained stone at their feet.

Forgetting everything else for just a brief second, Harry raced over to Tonks, gun in hand and anger blazing in his palms. He got there in time to hear her gurgle once, and then see her eyes glaze over with death. He was shaken to his core, but swallowed hard and turned back to the fight. *There were other lives to fight for...*

Bodies and those still standing were scattered across the expanse of the wall for a hundred feet from where Harry stood. Many were dangling over the edge towards the castle, some were still firing at the Death Eaters, others firing up into the night at the all but invisible and extremely stealthy vampires.

To his right, Harry also saw people fighting with Vampires down on the castle grounds, about twenty feet from the base of the wall. He didn't know how many creatures there were, but his main concern had to be the Death Eaters and Voldemort.

Running again, always running, Harry stood once more near his sword and surveyed the approaching aggressors with the cool, calm eyes of an experienced veteran of war. His face registered only the briefest surprise as he made eye contact with a familiar face out there in the crowd. Ethan Rafe, the Dark Lord's spawn, stood alongside his father. They were both firing Killing Curse at him with a deadly precision.

Laughing, whether from inner madness or at the insanity around him Harry didn't know, he threw himself down and leaned against the raised parapet wall, his head just visibly reflected in the glimmering blade standing in the stone a foot away. Two shimmering jets of deep green light passed overhead silently, and Harry watched them go still laughing.

He was alone in the entire universe, and many wanted him dead... it was only a matter of time before something pushed him over the edge. He was, after all, only a boy of seventeen.

"FIRE! FIRE! FIRE!" someone shouted around him, but Harry didn't bother to look towards who was speaking. If someone had taken it upon themselves to lead that was fine, Harry felt better just being a soldier, a weapon. It was easier to accept what he had been born to do that way.

Dozens, if not close to a hundred Death Eaters had been killed using the Muggle weaponry, and Harry could almost feel the anger seeping off the Dark Lord from where he sat.

"That's right you bastard...." he whispered. "I'm coming for you."

A body, dead and slick with blood, fell out of the sky in front of him, and Harry stared at it for a moment in mounting horror. He looked up and saw a flutter of stinking wings that was a vampire, and then back down to the corpse at his feet.

*It's... this is not fair... It's...*

"Ron?" he whispered, the soles of his boots now resting in the flowing blood seeping out of the neck of Ron Weasley. Or rather, what was left of his throat. Pale, glazed, and accusatory eyes stared at Harry from underneath that all too familiar red hair.

Nodding because it was something to do, Harry continued to stare as the battle raged on around him. His stomach was in knots, his throat dry, his hands holding his hair in fists. He wasn't aware of anything but the dead eyes of his best friend.

*Not the first and definitely not the last, Allarius screamed and laughed in his mind. It will never end, not for you, Harry. You'll kill them all and still lose.*

Harry was shaking his head now, breathing heavily and feeling the pain from his hurt ear. *It's not the Ron*, he reasoned. *It's not... it's not... it's not.... dear God, it's one of millions of Rons. It's... Ron? No.... no... no... NO!*

Without a thought anymore for his own safety, or anyone else's for that matter, Harry stood up. His eyes were unreadable and perhaps that was to be feared. He turned slowly, curses of death passing

mere inches around him. The sword of Gryffindor glowed almost green in the curse light before him, and Harry stared down at it emotionlessly.

It was imbedded in stone for a good foot and a half, and yet Harry pulled it out as if it had been stuck in nothing more than butter. Rifle in one hand, his left, and sword in the other, Harry stepped up onto the wall, presenting himself as a perfect target for all of his enemies out there, and then jumped back down onto the side of the roses.

*That's the way, Potter, Allarius cried. Make sure you give 'em one from me!*

\*\*\*\*

*Ten minutes earlier*

As Harry battled with a vampire who had just torn his earring roughly out of his ear, Ron, Hermione, Neville, and Ginny ran parallel to the wall, searching for Fred and George. Nothing and no one had seen any sign of them since the battle began, and they had been stationed near the lake for this watch. They should be somewhere nearby.

All four of them had their wands drawn, and all four of them were scared witless at the death and destruction going on around them. Men and women fell dead onto the ground before them, falling off the wall or sometimes from a vampire's claws. Overhead, about fifteen feet overhead, dozens of green curses that could only be Avada Kedavra shot silently through the air, seeking a target.

Ron was holding Hermione's hand, and she his. The same could be said for Neville and Ginny. Ron had already ran passed this way three times, searching for his brothers up on the wall - but to no avail. Fred and George weren't to be found, and the battle was heating up around them.

"We shouldn't be here...." Hermione was saying, tear stained eyes taking in the dead. "God... we should be in the castle."

"You go back," Ron said. "Take Ginny. Neville and I will-"

Ginny bristled. "If we're going back, we are all going back!" Her tone left no room for argument.

Ron cleared his throat as they passed a fallen soldier. "Let's get up on the wall," he managed.

"Are you crazy?" Hermione exclaimed, pulling him to a stop through their connected hands.

"Herm--"

Silently, smoothly, a vampire stepped onto the ground in front of them. Smiling, and that was what terrified Ron and the others to their very bones, the creature advanced, speaking in the low hiss of its kind, wings folding behind it.

"Children shouldn't mess in the affairs of their elders...." the vampire hissed, smiling. It walked towards the four of them, and they were all too stunned to move.

*It was real, and perhaps none of them realised that - fully realised it - until that moment.*

Ron stepped forward, swallowing and raised his wand. "Get back," he spat.

The vampire, a male, laughed. "You can't kill the dead, child. But the dead can kill you!"

There was a strangled yelp from behind Ron, and he spun to see another vampire - appearing from nowhere within the shadow cast by the darkness and the wall - with its fangs buried deep in Hermione's throat. Ron's legs gave way beneath him, his wand fell from his grasp and he would have hit the ground if not for the other creature.

A cold talon, sharp and bloodied, took him in the back of his neck and burst out of the other side of his throat, a spray of blood that splattered over Ginny's stunned and absolutely terrified face.

His vision fading as blood fell from him in what must have been gallons, Ron saw the second vampire rip Hermione's throat open,



spilling her blood and - in his opinion at that point - mercifully killing her. She wouldn't become one of them. It was all a waste though, his last thought was. *What the hell did any of this achieve?*

Neville fell next, defending Ginny. Razor sharp claws tore at his throat - the vampire's preferred move - and he fell to his knees, slumping back in the grass against the edge of the stone wall. Three dead, one left... one of some importance in the grand game being played.

Ginny Weasley, her eyes as round as saucers and as fearful as they ever could have been, stared in uncomprehending terror at the bodies of her friends, and brother, now lying on the stained grass close by. She vaguely saw the two vampires approaching her, and felt her back up against the wall. Her wand lay on the grass uselessly a few feet away.

"Interesting," the first vampire whispered, looking at Ginny and sniffing. "Do you smell it, Anfear?"

The second vampire, Anfear, nodded slowly. He was sniffing as well, and his dead eyes held curiosity, as well as hunger. "His scent is upon her, Unor."

Ginny was gibbering uncontrollably, her eyes darting to Ron, to Neville, to Hermione, to the creatures that had killed them. Tears ran unchecked down her face, and she did not know what to do.

"The Darkslayer,' Unor agreed, and for a moment there was fear in his eyes. "This child he loves... not the one belonging to this world though. The scent is weak, but he is connected in heart to her in a world that lies almost on top of this one."

"The Dark Lord would be pleased to have her," Anfear whispered. "But I sense the Darkslayer is close... we should act now, if we are going to."

Ginny screamed as two razor sharp claws dug into her shoulders, drawing blood, and she was lifted high above the ground. Away from her dead friends and family she was taken, high into the darkness above the battle. She screamed until her throat was hoarse, and then

some. Beneath her she saw the Death Eaters and.... oh God, and Voldemort. She was being taken to Voldemort.

Something told her death would have been easier than what lay ahead.

Back near the wall, the vampire known as Unor gazed up at the wall with dead glazed eyes, his wings beat heavily, and between his clawed feet he carried the body of the boy he had killed. The scent was on the boy as well, he could smell that now.... weak, no more than a grain of sand on a long beach, but it was there. The Darkslayer was mere feet away as well; he would deliver this present to him.

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*That's the way, Potter, Allarius cried. Make sure you give 'em one from me!*

Harry blocked the demon from his mind, pushing his power forth in a mental barrier that denied Allarius entry. It was a struggle almost constantly to keep that barrier raised, and that is why, when the worlds grew thin, Allarius could reach him. It would all end soon enough, one way or another.

No longer caring if he lived or died, only vowing to take as many with him as he could, as many of the bastards who wanted to wage this war - wage it against the Light and those who only wanted to live in peace. It had come to a point now, Harry knew killing, and knew it well. He had been born into it, a hero amongst soldiers, and he had come too far to lose... perhaps that was true, but it would be one hell of a gamble.

Walking, without a care in the world, his mind was a blank as he assessed the situation and the numbers against him. A few dozen Death Eaters in the lines ahead, perhaps four or five dozen more behind them, and Voldemort alongside Ethan Rafe.

Harry opened fire with the Muggle machine gun, modified of course, and cut into their lines.

He didn't aim for Voldemort or Ethan, knowing they would be shielded too well for his bullets of light to have any effect, but not all the Death Eaters would be defending, some - most - would be on the offence. Some of the modifications to the weapon had been to increase the rate of fire, and with Harry's uncanny aim, he slaughtered seventeen with his first four depressions of the trigger.

Not one feeling assaulted him, no regret, no remorse, no guilt. He sprayed the lines of the enemy mercilessly, aiming up into the trees to his left and right once or twice to shoot the undead that hung there in hiding - waiting to strike. He could sense them there, unexplainable but then he didn't give a damn if he could or not - if it worked to his advantage so be it. They would all die one way or another.

*We all die, after all.*

He was closing the gap, sidestepping killing and pain curses with a speed that was unmatched. He felt power, true power, *the* power, coursing through every vein and nerve in his body. It was pure magic, not the deeper power that lay within him, but it was enough to put his reflexes on edge and pump adrenalin into his system at an alarming rate.

Man after man after vampire fell and Harry was barely scratched. He took a Reductor curse in the chest but his armour deflected it effortlessly. Shot after shot he fired, not feeling anything, and he mowed the Death Eaters down. He was still walking forward, through the snow - his own blood colder than it. The roses behind him seemed to be singing, screaming, and Harry was silent.

Then he saw Ginny, and all the fight within him froze.

Fifty feet away stood Ethan Rafe, his arm across Ginny's throat, holding her close with his wand pointed towards the side of her head, twirling circles of her auburn hair. Voldemort stood nearby, and with a flick of his hand the entire Death Eater force charged forward. About sixty men and women, masked and screaming - raising their wands and... and some had swords.

Voldemort and Ethan, with a shell-shocked and crying Ginny held in his arms, fell back through the rush of Death Eaters, smiling - daring

Harry to attack and watch her die. He saw them disappear - Apparation or a Portkey, he didn't know which and wasn't sure where they would end up with Ginny. Magical transportation was next to useless in these final days, but if they were going to Slytherin Fortress then they might not have landed too far out. It wasn't that far away.

A severing charm to the chest brought him back to reality and moving fast, Harry fired three quick bursts from his rifle and then threw it aside into the snow to join the bodies of the Death Eaters he had killed. Swinging around his right hand, he swirled the sword of Gryffindor with a cool precision of a blade master, using every ounce of training Derris Trask had ever impressed upon him.

For all he knew, Derris lay dead behind him somewhere.

*They have Ginny*, he thought, his feelings for one Ginny confusing his thoughts. *That.... that.... hurts?* He wasn't sure anymore, reality had grown too thin around him and in his mind.

Anger surged into Harry, mixed and mingled with the feelings of love, of the need to protect, that blossomed inside of him whenever he thought of Ginny. For a brief, brief moment - he felt a wall so vast and large and thick, his pure magic sloshing against it, and knew it was the source of what he *could* be. Then it was gone, but the blade in his hand grew hot.

Harry fell back into the fight, back towards the approaching Death Eaters. A few feet away the first tips of the green Killing Curses were almost upon him. He could feel tendrils of the cold fingers that would most definitely kill him. He held the sword with both hands on the hilt, and then - as if he had planned for this moment all along - he called the blue electric-fire into his palms tied to the hilt.

The blade that belonged to him by birthright, by unbreakable bonds of blood, that was over a thousand years old, caught alight and glowed with blue flame up until the very tip of the sword. Roaring across the steel, like a raging river, blue fire swirled and grew, shrunk and changed, morphed and screamed to be used.

An affinity with weapons, Harry knew what he could do.

*Is this what the Hat had been afraid of when it gave me the sword?* he wondered, but didn't really care. He had the power, he had the will, he had the strength to do what needed to be done. He was the only one that ever would - Harry did what others never even dreamed of.

The sword felt heavy, heavier than it should as he raised it above his head. The light upon it was so bright that it blinded all who looked upon it, save Harry, and the vampires fled in fear, perhaps sensing in their dark ways what was to come.

Closing his eyes now, feeling just a tingle of regret that was human, Harry swung the blade down through the air on that star shot night. There was a tremendous bang, as if the blade had broken the sound barrier - and it had - and then a wave of blue power exploded from the steel and shot out in a large radius from Harry at the centre.

Everything was blown away and destroyed. The curses, no matter what they were, were all deflected back the way they had come, shooting up into the sky and then back. The Death Eaters, all of them, were knocked to the ground so hard that several simply died from the impact. Others were hit by the rain of falling curses, and some had been torn asunder by the wave of blue power.

Behind Harry, everyone still alive on the wall fell silent and some cried, for awe and fear, for the life and death, for witnessing the birth of some power wielded by a being that was beyond any of them. They stared at the boy, at Harry Potter, as if he were the Creator himself. And why should they not? When he could destroy and end life with such ferocity.

*Death...* that is the *only* universal constant. Ultimately, nothing can escape it.

It now surrounded Harry... not a soul, Light or Dark, was left standing around him. A few hundred feet away several vampires fell from the sky in flames, hitting the ground and dying again. The sword in Harry's hands glowed with power which died as its master fell to his knees upon the snow, amidst the field of death he had created.

The skin on Harry's hands had burnt onto the hilt of the blade, and yet he didn't feel any pain as he ripped them off, the sword sinking into the snow a few inches when he dropped it.

*This changes nothing!* Allarius spat within his mind, anger wrapped in fury wrapped in seething rage in every one of his words. *You hear me, boy? Not-a-thing! All the power of Eternity could not save you or Existence!*

Harry pushed the demon away with barely a thought as his magic calmed. He looked up and saw again the alien sky that blanketed a world that wasn't his own or any other he had walked upon. And one day that would be many. His eyes glistened with unshed tears, and as the flames began to die, he took a deep breath and laughed and screamed until his voice gave out.

Looking down at his hands with wild eyes, Harry began to beat his fists upon the snow before him until it was compressed so much that his knuckles split open and the burnt flesh of his palms began to sting.

*I killed them all by just swinging the sword,* he thought. His mind was a mess of colour and fallen foes... so many of them.

The wall behind him, the first line of defence for Hogwarts, was in smoking ruins in some parts. So many curses had broken through and torn holes into the stone. Nevertheless, he was watched by over one hundred terrified men and women.

*Has part of you finally realised the potential, Harry?* Allarius asked, and for once his voice was calm, serious, and neutral. *Look around you, look at the canvas this world is painted on... you and I, we could tear it down with a wave of our hands.*

*I think not,* Harry replied. His scar had started to burn - the first time in months. Was it Voldemort or Allarius or something else altogether causing that? It felt right to think it was Voldemort.

*I think soon you won't have a choice,* Allarius stated. *Look how far you've come, and yet there are still centuries to go. Remember, it is never over - not for you. Universes and Time may be wielded by your*

*hand but you are still bound by one rule, one law. The Law of Death... it is coming for you, Harry. You can't remain one step ahead forever.*

Harry growled. *I'll be coming for you, Allarius.*

He couldn't see him, but Harry felt the demon smile. *Indeed you will, you won't be able to stop yourself.... perhaps you'll find an army at my back, and army of creatures so terrifying that to look upon them would drive you insane... well, further insane.*

*I'll stand against you and anything that serves you,* Harry said, and for a wonder he did stand, pulling himself to his feet in the snow - picking up the long automatic rifle as he did.

*And that's what will finally get you and entire universes killed.... Doing what you believe to be right, Potter, will always have a price in blood that the innocent around you will have to pay.*

Harry was staring at the ground, speaking with the demon with a gun in his right hand when a whooshing of wings and an inner sense alerted him to something Dark nearby. He looked up, almost casually, to see a final vampire standing amongst the dead a few feet away.

It stared at him, and he at it. The wings, full of holes and riddled with decay, folded back and disappeared - making the creature appear more human than it truly was. The fangs in its mouth, long, sharp and bloody retreated and the creature smiled. A leather vest and pants was what it wore, and now the only outward sign that Harry could see that it was a vampire was the dark haze that seemed to cling to its outline. Seething with hate and fear.

"Leave or die," Harry said, swinging his rifle up and applying pressure on the trigger. Not enough to fire, but close enough for this work. "Ten, nine, eight...."

"Such power you have," the creature said, its voice now deep and harsh - not the hiss Harry was expecting. "But then... you don't belong in this world, do you."

Harry didn't blink. "Six, five, four...."

"Darkslayer, I am Unor - leader of the Fourteenth clan. You do not dare kill me!" The air around both of them froze, and Harry could see his breath on the air. The vampire didn't have any breath.

"Three, two.... Say 'Hi' to the devil for me... one--"

Harry pulled the trigger, and nothing happened. Three dull clicks sounded in his ear, but the weapon wouldn't fire. Something or someone had prevented it.

Unor smiled. "It is not my time to die, and the Powers know that--I bring you a message from the Dark, Darkslayer."

With a thought, Harry summoned the sword of Gryffindor from the ground at his feet and threw the rifle away. "Let's see them stop this one," he growled.

"You will not listen?" the vampire said, his eyes widening in disbelief. "The Dark commands--"

"When you meet your Master," Harry snarled, and in a blur so fast Unor had no time to dodge, thrust the blade clean into the vampire's chest and through its lead heart, "tell him my name's Harry Potter, and that I don't play your games."

Harry blinked once, and blue flame shot up the length of the blade, the vampire impaled upon it disintegrated in a cloud of red and was no more. Harry stared at the ground for a moment and then put the sword away out of sight.

Although he couldn't see it, as he turned to walk away, a million souls of both Light and Dark stood around him, staring silently with accusatory eyes. If they could be seen, their number would have stretched for miles in every direction, all eyes pointed towards the young man with the power. The countryside would have been lit up like a beacon for thousands of miles with white and black soul light.

It wasn't every day, after all, that the makings of a God were born.

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## Chapter 21 - Never Mind, I Tried

Nothing is at last sacred than the  
integrity of your own mind.

~~Ralph Waldo Emerson

Walls will crumble  
The Stream will run dry  
Across all worlds, Hope will die

Sun freezes, Moon swallows  
The land will be torn asunder  
He will be the cause... and the redemption

Darkslayer, marked by lightning  
Breaker of Destiny and Fate  
Destroyer of the Dark

He will come, and stand  
Eternity will fall at His feet  
Infinity to the palm of His hand

Light or Dark He may be  
For the Light He will always fight  
Creatures of the Dark will be slain in their thousands  
And He will walk for a lifetime

The Darkslayer will come, and He will stand against inevitability

~~ Dark Prophecies  
Attributed to Unor, of the Fourteenth Clan  
Spoken 1998 BC

\*~\*~\*~\*

August 16<sup>th</sup>, 1997  
35 days until the Autumnal Equinox

James Potter watched the too few students at the castle eating in relative silence in the Great Hall that morning. Everyone was still reeling from the battle the previous evening, the least of all of that being the news that three Hogwarts students, all Gryffindors, had been killed and that another had been kidnapped - her fate unknown.

James looked at his two children sitting together at the Gryffindor house table, which was barely a quarter full and likely, with the way things were going, would not be getting any bigger, and hoped silently that they survived the coming months. Michael and Melissa were as silent as the rest, their eyes weary and the way they held themselves suggested a feeling of hopelessness that everyone felt.

Despite the mood in the castle and the community out on the grounds, Voldemort was all but defeated - his army, most of it, ninety-nine percent of it, lay in a mass grave within the Dark Forest. Dumbledore had overseen that, having been absent from the fight the previous night... it had all happened so fast, fifteen minutes and all the blood was shed. Mostly Death Eater blood, thanks to the mystery that was Harry Potter.

*Harry, James thought. My blood, but not my son... what is he?*

Harry hadn't been seen since the battle last night, and there were a fair few hundred people searching for him since then. James suspected he wouldn't be found unless he wanted to be found. With power such as his, anything was possible.... anything. It was unbelievable, and yet it was there. That boy, Harry, had killed dozens with a single blast and had courage enough to walk head on towards tens upon tens of Killing Curses.

*And the vampires.... his mind whispered. Natural allies of the Dark Lord, and almost immortal.* One of the Aurors that had been watching Harry last night just moments after the fight, had reported that he had killed the clan leader of one of the thirty sects. To do so meant Harry would be marked, an invisible mark that would light him up like a Christmas tree for every Dark creature out there.

Harry had just become the most hunted person on the planet... again.

*He's beyond any of us... James thought, sighing. We can't even begin to imagine the path that lies before him... or the one that lies behind him. They're more amazing than all of the magic in this world.*

"He'll outlive us all...." James murmured, his appetite gone. He pushed the plate of food on the oak table in front of him away. He wasn't sure why he had said that, but he believed it with an unavertable certainty. "He'll still be fighting long after I'm in the grave."

*Long.*

*After.*

\*~\*~\*~\*

Deep within the Dark Forest, within its dead centre, a figure wrapped in pale blue light sat with his legs crossed and eyes closed upon the dirt-green grass. Trees, twisted and gnarled and covered in a thin layer of snow hemmed the figure in on all sides so he was all but invisible in the small, very small, clearing he sat in the middle of.

Around this glowing figure grew white roses in an almost random sprawl from where he sat. Some blazed with an inner light brighter than any star, some were tainted with wilted petals and hung down degradedly.

The pale blue light that coated every inch of Harry intensified a hundredfold and would have blinded any man who saw him for a few minutes if he wasn't so deep in the darkness of the forest. Still wearing the tattered jeans, that were bloody and covered in the remains of more than one vampire, and his slick basilisk armour of the previous night, Harry hadn't slept at all.

He didn't feel tired.... possibly couldn't feel tired with the amount of raw power seeping through his veins, with the strength of a roaring flood. A normal wizard's magic was nothing more than a drop in the ocean compared to the potential flowing through Harry.

*Why does it grow?* Harry wondered, not for the first time that early morning, that last night, the last six years. *Where does the power come from?*

There was no wind, not this deep in the forest, but Harry's long black hair flowed around his head almost vertically, if not gracefully, with the strength of the magic moving the still air around his body.

As quickly as it had come, mere seconds, the glow around Harry faded again - as it had been doing on and off all night and most of those few hours after dawn. A small tint, like a thin sheet of glass, remained flowing across his skin. The power highlighted his scars, his many, many scars, and avoided the lightning bolt upon his forehead as if it were a disease.

It was.

"What am I....?" he asked the trees around him, barely glancing at the white roses. "What is this power?"

He got no answer, and was alone in the world to try and figure it out.

*And he will have power the Dark Lord knows not....*

Frustrated, Harry had gone over that line of his prophecy thousands of times over the last twelve hours. It made no god damn sense.

"Love," he said. "Love releases that power.... what is the other strength?"

Two forces of unsurpassed power writhed through Harry's system. Many layers and levels of it hidden behind impenetrable walls and guarded barriers. One, was pure magic - every magical person possessed pure magic to some degree, Harry more than most and his was continuously growing for some unfathomable reason. The other was a type of power few knew existed, much less could tap in to.

*...Dark Lord knows not...*

Wracking his memory, which was a blur of wars and time spent healing, he could only think of one instance when that power had been released from behind the mountains of barriers that kept it safely under control. It had been on March 20<sup>th</sup> of that year, and a universe away. It had saved Ginny's life, allowed him to absorb a Killing Curse, and torn away a fair piece of the pure magic he wielded, which had ended up in Voldemort.

*He could have the same power, Harry thought, unable to suppress a shudder. Whatever I gave him, it could be growing like mine is... it is mine, after all.*

Shaking his head and shifting his legs from cramp, Harry tried not to think about that. He didn't want to know what Voldemort had been up to in his own world.... and if all went to plan, would never have to.

If all went to plan, if he could bend time and existence to his will.

"What right do I have to do that...." he whispered.

*Every right, one of the voices in his head spoke up. It sounded like Ron. Every right, mate. Don't let anyone tell you different. You'll save billions upon billions of lives. More. Everyone that died and will die because of the Weakening, you can stop that from ever happening. No one can deny you that, and if they try... well, defiance until the last drop of blood, Harry.*

*Time is a river, and we all get washed up on its banks at some point downstream. Swim against it, Harry, and see what happens.* The Hermione he loved and missed so much always sounded practical in his mind.

Harry blinked and stopped the voices. Imaginings didn't help in reality, though what was said once again felt right.

There would be resistance; wherever he went an enemy in some form wouldn't be far behind. Voldemort, Death Eaters, Basilisks, Dementors, Nundus, Bounty Hunters, Vampires, Demons, Allarius.... the list went on.

Light flared up once again around Harry with nothing more than a mere thought. With another it faded, but he had the strength to destroy this forest if he wished it so. Wielding the power with his sword, and it would be razed to the ground.

Dried blood clung to Harry's cheeks, neck, and his ear - where his earring had been pulled clean out - had scabbed over tenderly. He didn't care or notice how battered and dirty he was. He shifted his concentration over the small, jagged, seemingly insignificant scar upon his forehead.

Pain stung and twitched down its length, shooting sharp nails into his skull and mind. It was like a heartbeat, a pulse, and it hurt. Ignoring the pain easily enough, Harry's concentration upon the scar intensified, and then he was submerged in the power there.

He gasped as it had happened without his being aware. He felt the long distance that linked him with Voldemort, almost could see the beam that joined him and was burning and tearing holes through the thin, fragile fabric of existence.

"My God...." he breathed. Miles, upon countless ageless miles the connection spanned. It was infinite, the distance mind-boggling to say the least.

He felt the strength, the power, but he couldn't reach the Dark Lord. Voldemort was too far away across the space of universes. The link pulsed, and Harry felt only a few millimetres on the large scale it had been stretched. He knew that a thin, pale golden beam was visible to the right eyes from his forehead, and that it stretched to another universe.

But the beam wasn't fully golden.

Black, like oil, ran along the length of that beam as well. Harry shuddered at its presence, sensed its intent, its evil. He tentatively reached out to touch it with his mind, perhaps to wipe it clean and save the universe another headache. The hand in his mind came into contact with one of those dark patches and...

Harry threw up the meagre contents of his stomach in one tremendous hurl.

He retched and coughed, his eyes watered, his stomach was in knots. And the oil slick of evil upon his scar link remained, continuing its destruction of the Boundary.

*Bloody hell....* he sighed. Rarely had he felt something so.... so... *evil*. There was no other word for it.

Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, Harry pulled himself shakily to his feet - forgetting the connection in his scar. He realised, even though he had just thrown up, that he was starving, but full of energy. He set off back towards the castle the way he had arrived in the forest.

It had been an impulsive, yet somewhat necessary, decision last night to turn away from the road and into the dark woods. Everything in there fled before him and he wanted to study his power without disturbance. He hadn't discovered or realised much about it, in the end.

Traipsing through the snow, Harry glanced up through the sparse canopy overhead and assessed the weather. It was going to be a cool day, nothing extreme and almost normal for this time of year. He shrugged, feeling the wind on his bare arms and seeping in under his basilisk armour - the weather didn't really matter, Slytherin Fortress would still be there.

\*~\*~\*~\*

Glen Thomas sat in the Room of Requirement at the large ornate table that served as a meeting room for those governing this small community at Hogwarts. Before him lay a rifle in several parts, some wrapped in oily rags others glistening in the bright torchlight.

Despite the fact that this weapon had been magically insured for centuries, Glen still found it relaxing and fulfilling to take it apart himself and clean it. He had done it for years, after all, within his service in the SAS. Old habits die hard, and new habits are strong enough to fight back - as the saying went.

As he oiled the machine, Glen's thoughts were on the castle, the community, and overly the world. He had grown up in a world with six billion lives upon it... for all he knew now that number was reduced to about thirty-five hundred. It made him feel alone, that everything had all been for nothing as Mother Nature... or something else... had told them all not to argue with the constant barrage of changing weather.

"We can't be the only ones left...." Glen mumbled absently, fixing the weapon with a series of well practiced and blurry movements. He didn't need to test fire the gun to know it would work, sometimes you just knew.

Placing the weapon on the table before him, Glen cracked his aged and arthritic fingers - wincing a bit at the pain, and jumped in his chair as the door to the Room was flung open, and Harry Potter walked in.

"Christ," Glen stated as Harry stood at the opposite end of the table and nodded to him, with a slight inclination of his bloodied head. "You look like shit, son."

Harry smiled. "I need a favour, Glen."

Glen studied the dark rings around Harry's eyes, the blood encrusted to his face, arms, armour, and jeans.... he saw that the boy was dead on his feet, pale from hunger and swaying on the spot. Exhaustion.... no, nerves.... no... eagerness, perhaps.

"Name it," Glen said, rising from his chair and slinging the strap of the rifle across his back.

Harry took a deep breath. "I need you to drive me to Kinlochleven, and we need to have left five minutes ago."

Glen frowned. "You want to pull out that army truck we nicked from Dumfries? It's gathering dust down by that... that Qooditch pitch."

Harry grinned. "Quidditch," he corrected, "and yes, that's what I want. According to the maps in the library it's about two hundred miles from here - up the A82 and then on the 'B' roads. I'm assuming it'll be clearly signposted."



Glen nodded, stroking his wispy beard. It had grown over the last few days, he had quit shaving. There was no time, not while he was acting as leader for the non-magical folk.

"Who have you told about this, Harry?" Glen asked warily. "Albus? Your mother and father? Anyone but an old man with failing eyesight and arthritis?"

Harry shook his head. "I'm not getting anyone else killed - billions of lives were lost because of my..." He stopped himself from saying choices, and cleared his throat. "Now, Glen - or do I walk?"

Glen sighed. "We'll have to find some fuel on the way up, and hope its not all frozen in its pipes from the snow. Let's go."

They made it to the Entrance Hall without incident, but no sooner had they descended the stairs than Lily Potter emerged from the Great Hall. Harry had a quick glimpse of the students and professors eating breakfast before the doors closed behind his.... mother.

"Harry...." Lily said softly, her brilliant emerald eyes falling onto his mismatched ones. "You're hurt."

Whispering, Harry said to Glen. "Go on. Get the truck going, I'll... I'll be along in a minute."

Nodding uncertainly, Glen pulled his coat around himself and headed out into the wind, casting one concerned look back at Harry and Lily before disappearing out onto the grounds.

"Where have you been?" Lily asked, not forcefully and not kindly - just a simple statement. "We've had the Muggles and half the staff looking for you. We thought--"

"I'm leaving," Harry said, meeting her eyes levelly. It was harder than meeting Voldemort's.

Lily paused, here eyes wet with tears already. She trembled, a barrage of emotions fighting for dominance over her face. She twisted a strand of auburn hair around her finger nervously. "It would have been better for everyone if you had never come at all," she whispered.

Harry laughed despairingly. It had turned into a few tears of his own before he was done. "I know," he said, walking over to meet and see her, the woman who was his mother, properly. "God do I know that.... I'm sorry."

Lily shook her head, glancing around with equal despair at the empty hall and balconies around them. "Don't be... please. Just promise me, whatever's going on... whatever *you* have to do, you'll fix it. Something is wrong, and you mean to fix it...."

Harry nodded. "I do," he agreed, no sense lying. "And if all goes to plan you would have never met me...."

Lily's cheeks were stained with tears. "I don't regret you coming here, Harry. You saved us, but that wasn't enough. There are boundaries between worlds for a reason...."

Harry sniffed. *What was there to say?* "Would you believe me if I told you I have no idea what I'm doing?"

Smiling sadly, Lily nodded and placed a warm hand on his dirty and blood encrusted right cheek. "Do whatever feels right.... You'll, you'll pull through. I'm not sure there's much that could stop you."

Harry sighed. "If I don't see you... or the others.... again, tell them I'm sorry. I have to--"

His voice caught in his throat at the thought of what he had to do. *Save the universes, kill Evil, travel through time, get home, pick up where I left off....* It was a list of impossibilities.

"It's worse than you think," he said with finality, gesturing with his hand around him - meaning reality and existence. "Nothing else matters except that you stay within the protection offered by the white roses. Take care of them, and they will you. I... I'll miss you... it's helped me, having someone there these long months."

And that was the closest Harry would ever come to saying how alone he truly was.

\*~\*~\*~\*

Black tarmac passed by in a blur as Harry sat next to Glen in the fortified passenger seat, his head leaning on his arm which was leaning on the window. His eyes were hypnotised, to some degree, by the constant black the tyres rolled over at a speed just short of forty miles per hour.

They were two hours out of Hogwarts, alone and silent, Harry and Glen not talking but rather thinking. Harry's thoughts were dark, cold, pragmatic - but Glen's were concerned, proof given of this as he kept casting worried glances out of the corner of his eye towards Harry.

Once he said, "What are you doing, son?"

Harry shook his head and would say nothing. The look in his eyes made Glen keep driving with his mouth shut.

Half an hour out of Hogwarts they had stopped at the first Muggle town on the map and filled up the truck's tank with fuel - enough to get them about halfway to Kinlochleven. They'd have to fill up again soon.

Snow was still clumped under trees and coating hills and the roadside as they ploughed through it themselves, going slower than usual to make sure the tyres had a long enough chance to get a good grip on the road beneath the snow they were churning up. It wasn't that deep, but when you're travelling along the edge of a valley, you don't want to go shooting off the wrong side of the road.

Not a soul, living or dead, had been seen so far. There were no cars blocking the roads, no people or corpses in any of the towns they had passed through. It was an empty place, Scotland, and cold. The snow was melting, already nearly gone, and this made driving somewhat hazardous.

The indicator light for fuel was blinking on the dashboard of the military vehicle and the rusted old signpost on the side of the road said they would be upon the town of *Tyndrum* in seven miles. Glen seemed to think they'd make it that far on the fuel they had.

"Seven miles..." he muttered. "Seven miles is okay."

Harry's thoughts turned to finding the fortress hidden beyond the loch and wood in Kinlochleven. Slytherin Fortress, hidden for a thousand years. There had to be something special hiding it beyond repelling charms and concealing magic. Harry felt that if they got close enough he might be able to sense the vampires and dark beasts he knew were there.

*I could feel those vampires last night*, he mused, drawing his mouth into a thin line - holding back his anger and disgust. *Darkslayer....* he thought, *that's pretty cheap.*

Sighing, Harry leaned back in his seat, the wind in his hair, and closed his eyes. Behind those closed lids he saw a mass of writhing and burnt flesh, a splattering of eyes and heard the insane laughter of the demon, Allarius. He saw him, *it*, in part of his true form. His eyes sprung open in surprise.

*You wouldn't win any beauty contests*, Harry smiled, feeling the demon's presence within his mind, on the edge of his thought, standing upon the tattered remains of part of the Boundary.

*Be careful, Harry*, Allarius whispered, unable to hide the shock in his voice at being discovered before he had spoken. Harry had never done that before. *Be very careful, the Boundary is extremely thin ahead of you.... I may arrange a few surprises.*

*Do your worst, you know you can't kill me.*

Laughter. *Not for lack of trying... don't fall asleep, Harry. There is still much more death to come.*

As its presence faded away, Harry shook his head, as if to shake away the fatigue he had begun to feel. He had been running on pure power all night and most of the morning, and that had to have taken something out of him - especially because he hadn't slept in nearly forty hours, and then only a few hours. There was too much coming to fall asleep.

*Perhaps I should have waited...* he began, but then bit his lip. *No, they'll kill Ginny if they haven't already. I can't let them, even if she's... I love her, Ginny, and that's enough.*

He realised he was drifting again, and tried to shift himself so he was uncomfortable in his seat - they would be stopping soon so he'd get out and stretch his legs, perhaps see if there was any food in the fuel station that was still good enough to eat. Chocolate, crisps, sealed stuff.

The engine began spluttering as they rounded a cliff face and were still a mile out of the next town. *Tyndrum.*

*Get out and give it a push, Potter, Allarius laughed. Or I might myself. It's almost thin enough here to cross over, can't you feel it?*

Harry glanced around at the vast expanse of hills and snow capped mountains around their car, to the rocky valleys beneath the road, to the partially frozen river half a mile away on the banks of a small forest that ran up the side of a mountain. He looked and saw all of this, and felt as if he could reach out with his hand and tear it all away.

*I feel it, he said. But it's still too strong for you to punch through.*

*One month, Potter. One month and all bets are off. The Equinox, the Boundary's day off - either you'll come to me or I'll come to you. Oh yes, we are going to shake the foundations of time and space with our battle. It will be magnificent, my power far outweighs yours, you may as well--*

*Don't tell me it's not worth fighting for, Harry growled. One month... you'll regret every word you ever said to me.*

It was a full minute before the laughter faded from Harry's mind, and by that time the small town of Tyndrum was visible in the valley up ahead, situated alongside the loch that the river running half a mile away drained into. Even from this distance Harry could tell the town was as dead as everything else. It just felt that way.

"That's as empty as the rest of them," Glen mumbled, feeling it as well. "Let's hope not too many of the residents were still here before the storms."

"Hope for the best but prepare for the worst," Harry said.

The road sloped downwards into the snow strewn valley and the truck was running on nothing but fumes at this point. Glen was cursing himself for not filling up any of the cans on the back of the truck when they cruised down into the town. The engine dying in a stall as they did.

Thankfully the slight incline of the road kept them going another few hundred feet, and as luck would have it the first building on the road through the town was a:

*BP AutoGas*

Applying the brake slightly, Glen eased the truck up and over the curb and brought it to a rest near one of the four green petrol pumps.

"Didn't think we'd make it there for a second," he said, opening the door.

Harry smiled and opened his own door, stepping out onto the hard tarmac near the fuel pump. A slight wind ruffled his hair, not his clothes because he wasn't wearing a shirt, only his basilisk armour. The town was dead, and there did seem to be food over inside the convenience store, but it wasn't silent.

Carried on the wind, perhaps from the other side of the town, was the soft beats of some classical music. Almost inaudible, Harry found himself humming along to the tune as Glen filled the tank and he went over to break into the store.

The music faded away to nothing and then returned as jazz by the time he reached the glass automatic doors. As he had expected, they didn't open. With a thought and a spark of magic from his fingers, the pane of glass in the door disappeared and he stepped inside.

The smell of rancid meats and decomposing vegetables flared up his nostrils but it didn't faze Harry - he had smelled worse, after all - from things that were alive and not even as fresh as the meat in here. The power to the place hadn't been running for at least a fortnight, so the large freezers and refrigerators across the store were silent and dark, but Harry grabbed four bottles of water from them just the same - it was cold enough.

From behind the counter near the cash register he reached over and acquired some plastic bags, putting the water in one and then filling the rest up with food that was still good. Chocolate, biscuits, crisps, and sweets for the most part - but there was some dry beef strips in sealed packets, and he chucked them into the bag as well.

As he was 'borrowing' some food and supplies, the music, possibly playing on an endless loop changed again - this time to a song with words as well as music. There was a guitar and drum solo and then the words were sung to low for Harry to hear. He continued borrowing food.

Walking along the aisle with a few bags in one hand and Maltesers in the other, Harry threw them in the bag and reached for another, near a selection of magazines. His hand stopped as he read the cover of the nearest magazine - only meaning to give it a passing glance.

*When will it end?*

The magazine was titled, *Time*, and on the front it showed an impressive photo of the lightning storms that had all but destroyed the Northern Hemisphere. The next magazine on the rack was much the same, as were many of the others. One showed a picture of a white rose in flames, with the caption:

*All that was beautiful is burning away.*

Harry stuffed a few tins of corn and tuna into his bags and left the store in a hurry. He knew he was at the centre of something big, bigger than he had yet imagined, but to know how big was the road to madness. He stepped back out into the cool wind, just as the music from some undetermined source changed tracks again. This time he could hear the words, as they carried well on the wind.

There were drums and guitars again, and then,

*By the last breath of the fourth winds blow  
Better raise your ears  
The sound of hooves knocks at your door  
Lock up your wife and children now*

*It's time to wield the blade  
For now you have got some company*

Harry shook, walking over to Glen who was still filling up the truck with fuel. Those words felt deeper than they should have, were louder than they should have been. He was immediately on edge.

"Damn thing was nearly frozen in the pipes," Glen grumbled. "Got it working but its going slow. Might take five minutes or so."

Harry nodded absently, putting his bags on the seat behind the passenger door. He removed a bag of M&M's and tore them open.

*The Horsemen are drawing nearer  
On the leather steeds they ride  
They have come to take your life  
On through the dead of night  
With the four Horsemen ride  
or choose your fate and die*

Leaning against the side of the ATV, Harry felt the wind around him die and the music intensify. Glen was frowning across town in the direction it was coming from, wondering what still had power, and then returned to pumping fuel.

Biting down on a few of the chocolate bits, Harry's sharp eyes travelled the length of the road, the sky, all of the nearby buildings and even to the tops of the mountains in the distance. There was nothing, and yet.... It was *thinner*. That was it, the Boundary that held all universes apart was weakening almost visibly right now, right here. What would slip in when it snapped?

*Not Allarius, Harry thought. He may be causing the break now, but he can't come through... can he?*

*You have been dying since the day  
You were born  
You know it has all been planned  
The quartet of deliverance rides  
A sinner once a sinner twice*



No                need                for                confession                now  
Cause now you have got the fight of your life

"How's it coming, Glen?" Harry asked, screwing up the empty packet of chocolate in his palm.

"Slower, the fuel just doesn't want to come. Quarter of a tank maybe. Five minutes."

Nodding, Harry remained vigilant.

The                Horsemen                are                drawing                nearer  
On                the                leather                steeds                they                ride  
They                have                come                to                take                your                life  
On                through                the                dead                of                night  
With                the                four                Horsemen                ride  
or choose your fate and die

Harry reached into the truck through the side panel door and picked up his long strapped automatic rifle, slinging it over his shoulder. He took a few steps towards the snow covered embankment that separated the road from the fuel station. He could see the tire tracks from the truck that Glen had struggled to haul into the station.

Squatting down, Harry dropped his rifle onto his lap and ran a hand through the snow, glancing left and right and in front of him for any sign, anything to show that something was amiss. He could feel it coming, like feeling the vibrations in a railroad track before the train was visible. He kept a finger on the trigger of his weapon.

Time  
has                taken                its                toll                on                you  
The                lines                that                crack                your                face  
Famine  
Your                body                it                has                torn                through  
Withered                in                every                place  
Pestilence  
For                what                you                have                had                to                endure  
And                what                you                have                put                others                through  
Death

*Deliverance for you for sure  
There is nothing you can do*

The words of this song were somehow appropriate, heavy metal music, harsh tones and loud music. Harry's mismatched eyes glinted as he caught a ripple in the air about fifty feet away, the light from the sun seeming to bend and turn a corner. A refraction of something, like a plastic rule moments before it snapped.

Sucking his teeth thoughtfully, Harry picked up a handful of snow and threw it towards this odd bend in the air. The white powder swirled towards it, spreading out, and then simply disappeared. Harry grinned, unable to help it, that did look pretty cool.

"Almost got it, Harry," Glen called. "Two minutes."

Harry stood up, aiming his rifle toward the growing and rippling disturbance that turned and moulded the fabric of reality like clay.

*So gather round young warriors now  
and saddle up your steeds  
Killing scores with demon swords  
Now is the death of doers of wrong  
Swing the judgment hammer down  
Safely inside armour blood guts and sweat*

*Killing scores with demon swords*, Harry thought. *The universe has a sick sense of humour*. He levelled his gun on the rippling disturbance and opened fire. Fifteen silent balls of light, silent due to the charms, shot through the air and came to a floating stop millimetres from the outermost tendril of the ripple. There they simply disintegrated.

"Alright...." Harry breathed.

Behind him he heard Glen replace the pump into its stand and shuffle back into the driver's seat.

*The Horsemen are drawing nearer  
On the leather steeds they ride  
They have come to take your life  
On through the dead of night*

*With the four Horsemen ride  
or choose your fate and die*

The engine in the truck roared to life just as a long, jagged black tear was ripped open in the air, and a large mass of seething flesh jumped out atop of a leathery beast.

Harry's reflexes were among the sharpest in existence, and seventeen glowing shots pounded into the creatures bleeding and smoking chest before he threw himself to the ground as several tonnes of demon sprang over the top of him.

Rolling in the snow, Harry turned and brought his weapon up; ignoring the trail of flames that sprang out of the hooves of whatever beast this demon was riding upon. He fired another twelve times, four depressions of the trigger, and made a hole clean through the demon's chest. Twenty nine shots with a pulse rifle would do that to anyone.

Glen was staring dumbfounded at the sudden appearance of such a monster, even as Harry was firing his thirtieth shot he had barely begun to react. It hurt his eyes to look at the tear in the air behind Harry that had let this monster into the world.

A lance of fire and steel swung arcs above the demon's head as he turned the snarling, hairy, disfigured and bleeding monster upon which it rode around, searching for Harry. The seven inch hole in its chest didn't seem to bother it in the least.

Harry was smiling, already on his feet as another demon - identical to the first, road out of the hole behind him. He cursed and swung his rifle around, blowing away four of the creature's fourteen eyes. Decomposing flesh and blood assaulted his nostrils, even as a third creature followed the second.

*There'll be a fourth one,* Harry thought wryly, adrenalin running anew in his system. He was surprised it ever left some days. *Allarius is not without a sense of humour. That song was probably his doing as well.*

"GET THE TRUCK OUT OF HERE, GLEN!" Harry cried, startling the old man into action. He had a pistol of his own, and as Harry fired

from one side, running back towards the fuel station and three of his enemies, Glen fired half a dozen true shots of his own, bouncing the ATV over the curb and back out onto the slippery road, leaving a long black skid upon the surface.

Harry had his own pistol holstered alongside the right pocket of his jeans, hanging on a bloodied belt. He didn't draw it, not yet. But it was there.

Harry darted forward, ducking under a lance of flame from one of the screeching demons before firing another nine shots in three quick bursts. They didn't have much of an effect on any of the targets.

Thunderous hooves behind Harry alerted him to the presence of the fourth creature, and a large sucking sound made him realise the tear in the air had been sealed again, the Boundary doing what it was made for even with its decaying power. He fell to his knees in his bloodstained jeans and then onto his back, a stream of purple fire and a large thick lance streaming over his head as the ground shook and cracked under the weight of the last monster and demon.

The hooves of the creatures left roaring flames wherever they stepped, melting snow and burning *concrete*. Harry was mindful that they were in a highly flammable area - glancing nervously towards the petrol pumps.

Circling him now, the four demons screeched and roared, seethed and bled, they were among the first demons to ever leave their eternity old prison within the darkness of the Boundary, and the hated all things living. Harry would have to die.

*Surprise!* Allarius cried. *I told you I could do it.*

*Yeah, terrific,* Harry replied, firing and taking steps to keep all monsters within his vision. *Do you want a goddamn medal, or something?*

Laughter, always the laughter that burnt into his mind. *Good one, Harry. We could've been great together, you know. OH! Look out on your left!*

For some reason, Harry didn't doubt Allarius, and ducked just in time to avoid a lance taking off his head. When he stood back up, firing his rifle in one long continued burst, he couldn't sense Allarius anymore.

"Pottteerrr....." the nearest demon gargled through several bullet holes in its throat. Harry added a few more, breathing hard and dodging death at every turn. The ground around him was splattered with blood that burned and burst into flame.

The circling beasts had created a wall of fire in every direction, effectively sealing him in. Two of the demons charged in unison, the other two swinging their long lances towards him at the same time. Harry did the only thing that came to mind, and charged one of the hundred tonne beasts himself.

Muscle, corded and inches thick, against Harry in his basilisk armour. Harry never intended to grapple with it though - as he would have been pounded into the ground - and instead fired quickly into the head of the monster the demon was riding upon. He managed twenty seven shots, and this reduced the monster's head to a bloody pulp, the ground and its fur alight with its burning blood and brains. The smell was horrific.

Harry had killed it, and at the last possible moment, threw himself aside as the legs of the monster gave way beneath it, shaking the ground and running up the concrete. The demon on top of it screeched in fury, toppling forward itself only to be crushed underneath the bulking weight of the monster it had ridden. They both burst into flames as they died.

Nursing a few bruised ribs, Harry stood and turned once again to the remaining three monsters. He was tired, but his magic practically screamed to be used, and he obliged it. Spheres of pure energy pounded out of his rifle at a rate of nine per second, whilst his other palm, no longer used to steady the rifle, glowed with a familiar blue power.

Glen accelerated, still firing his pistol, further down the road as Harry's arm lit up. He had seen that before, and knew it best he retreat to a safe distance. He just prayed Harry wouldn't blow himself to pieces with the several hundred litres of fuel he was standing on.

Although Glen wasn't sure if that would stop the kid, he had seen too much of Harry in these last few weeks to doubt his ability to survive.

Smiling, Harry fired a final burst of energy from the rifle, blowing apart the lance hand of the nearest demon. The long staff weapon fell to the ground and disintegrated in a stunning spurt of long, bony fingers and fiery blood. With that done, Harry threw the rifle aside, forgetting about it instantly but marking where it landed just in case. Both his arms now burst to life with equal, unmatched titanic strength.

*With this power I can do anything, absolutely anything!* Almost anything. He could do it all except the one thing that mattered - he couldn't break the rule of the equinox.

Fused to his skin, a part of him as much as his legs were, the blue electric-fire flowed up to his shoulder and encased his hands completely. His mismatched eyes held the hint of blue as well, almost defeating the green for a moment.

"Who wants to play?" he whispered.

The demons were circling him again, down to three, and were clearly uncertain - not quite daring to approach. Their blood lust would win out though, their fury at anything living practically blinding them to all else except Harry's destruction. The one on his right, nearest the road, and sporting twelve or so holes in its back from Glen's pistol, attacked first.

This time Harry did charge it down, smiling and arms aglow.

They met in the middle. Over one hundred tonnes of pure corded muscle condensed into the monster with its demon rider bore down upon Harry. He put his arms out in front of him, and without a moments hesitation dug them deep into the monsters charging head. Stopping it by digging his heels in.

Digging his legs into the ground, he broke through the concrete and felt hard soil, using his raw power to stop the ton upon heavy ton of pressure that would have rode through anyone else. With a cry of rage, Harry tossed the monster aside with deep gouges in the sides of its head, and his palms exploded with thin lightning bolts.

The demon atop of the dying monster simply vanished in a cloud of red haze.

Harry turned in the small pit he had been forced into with the awesome pressure between his magic and the beast, in time to punch with his enclosed fist at the head of a third monster, deflecting a blow with the lance as he did. A storm of lightning followed, churning up snow and striking the fuel pumps, and the third demon died.

Harry jumped up out of the hole he had dug himself into, and eyed the final demon, standing with its lance raised and glaring hate at him. Harry saw some of his magic had destroyed a fuel pump, and that was now spurting up fuel in a dangerous fountain. It didn't help matters that the very concrete was aflame and spreading fast. This station was going up, and... and...

Harry was going to help it along.

"Poootttteeer...." it shrieked, hate in every syllable. "DIIIEEEEE!"

Smiling again, Harry checked to see if Glen was a safe distance away. He could no longer see him upon the road. He was smart enough to flee when the fuel pump erupted. Not wasting another second, feeling the heat of the flames and the power in his arms, Harry raised his left glowing arm and pointed it skywards. His right one died of all power, and in a blur Harry drew the almost forgotten pistol from his holster.

The demon roared and kicked his mount into a run. Harry shook his head, and looked down the sight of the weapon, not really needing to take much care aiming. He had a natural affinity, after all. He fired once, the sphere of light hitting its target in the blink of an eye. The fountain of fuel, already flooding the ground, surging up from a depository hundreds of litres strong under the ground, exploded in a heartbeat as the magic surged through it.

As soon as the trigger was pressed, Harry clenched his raised left hand into a fist, and a dome of transparent white and blue light fell around him like a waterfall, sealing him in and creating the strongest magical shield ever. He fell down onto one knee to brace himself, keeping his arm raised as the world exploded around him.

It sounded like the end of the world anyway, damn near deafening. There was a brief blinding white light and then searing orange and red flames in a wall of pure fire surrounded his shield, and encasing Harry within its searing heat.

The demon was burnt to nothing but ash in half a second, even as its lance fell. The last horsemen died.

Fire raged in an insurmountable ball around Harry inside his shield. The air was cool within his protection, but outside it was superheated. Enough to burn him all over to the bone. His shields would hold though, it was created using barely a drop of his power.

Half a mile away, Glen swore as a wave of hot air washed over him and he lost control of the speeding truck for just a second. In the rear view mirror all he could see was a smoky haze and a brilliant ball of orange. He stomped on the brake, brought the ATV to a screeching halt and jumped out as fast as his old legs could carry him, bringing his pistol up before him as he had been trained to do.

His jaw dropped and he stared in disbelief at the size of the explosion half a mile away. He knew Harry was in that, knew he was the cause, and knew that he couldn't have survived the intense heat of over a thousand litres, two thousand even, of fuel exploding in one incinerating moment.

He sagged against the side of the truck, his pistol falling to his side uselessly, and still dared to look for Harry upon the road. It was nothing but a wasteland of smoky debris and flames. He swore, and yet still expected to see the young man.

Harry had to wait ten minutes before the flames eating away at his shield died down, and the haze of heat in the air disappeared. When he felt it safe, he unclenched his fist and dispelled the shield, it fell in a rain of blue and white sparks around him.

Coughing from the clouds of billowing smoke raging up from the disaster area, and from the heat that still lingered in the air. He dashed away from the smoky remains of the fuel station and surrounding houses and stores. Nothing but burnt out husks now, if that. No sign of any of the monsters or demons, and Harry hadn't



really expected any. He headed off down the road to where he had last seen Glen, hoping the old man was all right.

His blackened jeans, which had taken a fair beating over the last day or so, smoked and his boots did as well. He was coated in a layer of sweat. The cold wind, which fought for dominance over the blazing remains of the fuel station, felt great against his hot skin.

As he walked, he holstered the pistol still gripped in his right hand. The weapon that had caused all of the destruction, hanging from the waist of the weapon that would cause the *final* destruction.

\*~\*~\*~\*

Glen sighed with relief as he caught sight of the lone figure walking almost calmly up the road towards him, with a hand in his pocket and a pensive look upon his face. He had no idea how Harry had done it, but he had survived that inferno.

"Let's keep going," was all the boy said when he reached the ATV. He offered Glen a small smile, before reaching into the back of the truck and snatching up a large bag of Maltesers from the pile. If it wasn't for the blood, the ash, and the sweat that lined his body, you'd never know he'd just battled four demons and sat within a thousand litres of exploding fuel.

Back on the road, Glen found his hands shaking on the wheel, and himself casting more nervous glances towards Harry. If Harry noticed this he said nothing, and was quite happy to drink from a bottle of water and eat his sweets. Soon enough they encountered the first snow covered road sign that had their destination upon it.

*Kinlochleven 70*

Seventy miles to Slytherin Fortress, give or take one or two. They'd be there within two hours. Harry was ready to run a mile a minute though, still feeling his power surging through his veins. It was all he could do to keep it under control, and that was frightening.

*Good show, Potter, Allarius said. Harry had felt him coming, felt him enter his mind, but remained silent. You have a flare for the extraordinary.*

*Any more surprises, Allarius? Harry asked, almost hoping for more. He squashed that thought quickly. He'd fight in defence, but actually wanting to kill.... dark days ahead.*

*We'll see... you sound almost eager for more. Come over to the dark side, Harry, I am your father. HA HA! Hmm... yes, we'll definitely see. The fabric is only getting thinner as you approach this fortress. Bye for now.*

Glen swore, as he had been doing frequently the last few miles, as the truck spun on a slushy part of the road covered in half melted snow and debris. He righted it again, applying the right amount of clutch to avoid a stall and spin, and they carried on. Sixty five miles to Kinlochleven.

Twenty minutes later and Harry found himself whispering the words to the horsemen song under his breath, he shook his head with a smile and reached onto the back seat and grabbed a Snicker's bar. He hadn't eaten any chocolate for months really, and was thinking now why the hell not? It was good stuff, he offered one to Glen and they drove on in silence.

*Kinlochleven 40*

eventually gave way to,

*Kinlochleven 20*

"I hope you know what you're doing, son," Glen said abruptly, as they passed the road marker. "What're we heading into now?"

"We are not heading into anything," Harry said. "You're going to hang back in the town while I go dismantle the fortress brick by brick if I have to. Ginny's in there, gonna see about that. And I can't be looking out for you. Safer for us all if you're just ready to go when I get back."

Glen sniffed. "Not sure I care for being left behind," he said. "We'll get there, and if I happen to be going your way from there so be it."

Harry only smiled.

"Who's Ginny?" Glen asked suddenly, and Harry's smile faded. "I... em... don't mean to pry--"

"She's a friend, in more ways than one," Harry replied cryptically. "She'll die and yet live again, the centaur said. I haven't forgotten." His eyes took on a look of universal longing. "I have to know if she's dead or alive now, in this world. I know that doesn't make much sense to you, but it's everything to me."

A crystal clear image of Ginny falling to her knees as he stepped into the Boundary played through his mind, clutching the ring he had given back to her. Harry sighed and they, once again, continued on. One more mile on a long road that had no end in sight.

\*~\*~\*~\*

### ***Kinlochleven***

*A*

*Mining*

*Town*

*since the 1800s*

*It's been around a lot longer than that,* Harry thought, gazing at the Muggle signpost as they entered the deserted town. The stench of cold death was upon the air here, and Harry could almost feel the pure evil that was hidden somewhere nearby. *About eight hundred years more.*

At first glance this town was like any other that Harry had ever been to over the last few weeks. Empty houses, corpses littering the streets and inside parked and crashed cars. It stank, it was silent, it was a ghost town - one of thousands all over the world.

At second glance Harry saw, in a deep valley far off to his left, that gave way to a large mountain that's tip was shrouded in low level cloud, Loch Leven, and the wood that ran along its far bank. Follow the loch and wood. He felt that he was looking at the fortress now, but couldn't quite see it yet.

"We need to be on the road over there," Harry pointed towards the forest. "Drive through the town and around the head of the loch. We'll come up from behind and.... whatever."

The main street twisted and wound its way up through the hills and down past supermarkets and stores, Muggle streets and an old mine high up on the side of the highland to the right. It was all deserted, all empty. At one point Glen had to shove the car into Fifth and roar it over a roundabout to avoid an upturned bus.

Too quiet, way too quiet.

Five minutes later and they left the main part of the mining town, which gave way to sparse cottages that were draped with melting snow and held the scent of death. They crossed a bridge which spanned the narrow neck of the loch, and Glen turned down the first dirt road that led towards the forest.

"Can you feel that?" asked Harry, gasping at the nausea that had developed in his stomach just now, and the humming he could hear.

"Feel what?" asked Glen.

Harry clicked his teeth thoughtfully. "We're close."

There was a track large enough for the truck to go down leading into the forest. Harry got out of the truck and shut his door, leaning back in through the window to look at Glen. It was a long minute before he spoke.

"Please don't follow me," he said. "I don't want another death on my conscience."

"I can help," Glen began. "Just--"

"Three hours," Harry cut in. "If I'm not back in three hours, do what you want. Come after me, leave, sit here and wait longer... whatever. Just give me three hours."

Glen sighed, turning the key in the ignition, killing the engine. "A lot can happen in three hours."

Harry grinned. "Don't eat my Maltesers. I intend to be back in an hour, hour-half tops."

Glen nodded and flicked on the toggle for the radio, and began turning the knob through the frequencies. "This'll keep me busy," he said. "Though come five o'clock..."

Harry nodded and turned away, snow crunching under his boots. He looked around at the loch, at the entrance through the trees into the darkened forest, to Glen in the truck and back towards the empty town. Taking a deep breath, he removed the shrunken trunk from his left jeans pocket and increased its size.

Coughing from a bit too much smoke inhalation, Harry kicked open the lid and frowned at the contents. There were potions, a broomstick, robes, a spare wand, clothes, and a fair selection of advanced Muggle weaponry. He picked out a new automatic rifle to replace the one he had incinerated in Tyndrum, and closed and shrunk the trunk, placing it back in his pocket.

Slinging the strap of the weapon over his shoulder, Harry turned a final time, nodded to Glen, and then set off in the direction that felt right - into the forest.

Glen sighed and watched him go with concern. He tapped his fingers nervously on the steering wheel, while the radio churned through frequency after empty frequency - all of them bringing up static. He saw Harry enter the forest and disappear under its eaves, three hours to wait now.

\*~\*~\*~\*

In the end it was, of course, the right thing to do, the right way to go. Harry had to know, had to know if this Ginny was dead... his very sanity, what little of it was left, depended on that.

The forest path was seldom used, and soon became overgrown in many parts, narrowing to almost nothing at others as huge oak trees loomed over head, some covered in snow, some with shining green and golden leaves.

Sunlight shot through the canopy overhead in singular beams that shined to light the way for Harry, almost following the direction of the path exactly. He thought even the light might be bending that way, to accommodate him. Stranger things have happened.

If there was any doubt in Harry's mind that this was the right way, that was all shed away as he happened upon the first group of roses, growing unnaturally up and around the base of a mighty oak. White and Black, fighting for dominance over the tree - and black was winning.

The first group Harry passed, he actually stopped and incinerated the black roses, but doing that soon proved to be impossible. The moss strewn, and leaf covered forest floor was practically bursting with buds that grew to life as Harry walked by them, sensing his presence perhaps. White was almost as frequent as black, but not quite. There were more black roses and in this part of the forest that seemed to dim the light.

*The world is thin here, Harry thought with regret. Hanging on by its fingernails even.*

*Waiting for just the right push, Allarius breathed. You're powerful enough to give it that push, Harry. Reckon you can survive a universe falling away from under your feet? Even after all that's happened... I still wouldn't bet against you.*

Harry grinned and crushed the nearest black rose under his basilisk hide boot. *Remember that, when I see you next,* he laughed.

*You'll die a thousand deaths for every rose you kill, Potter, Allarius snarled. My army will see to that... oh yes.*

Army? Harry asked.

*Yep. A legion of the universe's most hated sons of bitches... and they all want your blood, Harry.*

Defiance. Harry crushed another three black roses in quick succession. Defiance. Harry continued to grin. *We'll see how that one plays out.*

Allarius was gone, as quickly as he had come. The demon seemed to have more power the nearer to Slytherin Fortress Harry drew. The world was indeed getting thinner, almost enough so Allarius was at his strongest. *He may be able to break through....* Harry thought, but then shoved that thought away. He had other things to worry about.

The feeling of nausea in Harry's stomach increased as he heard the sound of gushing water. He could feel, sense, the hundreds of dark beasts and creatures that lived in and beneath Slytherin Fortress - they were close. He also began to feel the tug of the repelling charms, urging him to turn away. With a surge of power and a thought Harry shoved those charms away.

*He was getting close... to what, he wasn't entirely sure.*

He was almost knee deep in roses at this point, and as far as he could see in the dark underlay of the forest they spread for miles. White had become increasingly rare, and now only one stood out amongst a crowd of black defiantly, daring to exist. Harry took care not to step on a single petal of any white roses. He couldn't care less about the black ones though, and there was a long trail of crushed plants behind him.

Ten minutes later, Harry was now deep into the forest and almost to the other side, near the loch, and Harry happened upon a stream rushing across the path and down to, he supposed, the loch. It was fat with melted snow water from atop the mountains, but Harry steeled himself against it and waded across. The water line went up to his waste, but thankfully it wasn't flowing that fast, and he managed to cross the expanse of it easily enough.

A quick drying charm later, and Harry moved on. There was no path anymore, and only black roses. It didn't matter; Harry could have found his way with his eyes closed at this point. He shifted the rifle on his shoulder, comfortable with its near weightlessness, and spotted the first hint of light through the trees that marked the line on the edge of the forest.

"Almost there...." he breathed, crushing another half a dozen black roses underfoot.

The trees grew thinner now, and the oppressiveness of the dark canopy began to fade and shadowy light took over. The air felt stagnant... old, lost. Harry found himself taking as few breaths of it as possible. He took gentle steps and wasn't making a sound. He paused as a snowy white owl flew across his path and disappeared into the trees.

*Hedwig*, he thought, and moved on. Anything could happen in these final days.

And then he was out of the forest, on the far side of Loch Leven three miles from where he had left Glen parked in the ATV. The sparkling waters of the loch seemed dull here, and the mountain on his far right tall and impregnable. There was no sign, whatsoever, of a fortress.

"It's here...." Harry whispered, his eyes scanning the surroundings. The town wasn't visible, but there were black roses everywhere.... and reality was thinner than a sheet of paper.

*If I sneezed it would fall away*, he thought. *Not quite, but getting there.*

Closing his eyes, Harry felt the pull in his stomach, and heard the screeching and writhing of a thousand dark creatures somewhere nearby, even under the ground at his feet. It was like feeling sick, but then again nothing like it. He could sense evil, violence, war. He began walking through black roses and snow towards the high mountain. He already walked the foothills of that mountain.

It was a desolate place, desolate and cold. There may not have been another soul anywhere for all Harry knew. He was alone with existence falling around his shoulders.

Happy days.

Sniffing, Harry adjusted the strap of the rifle again to stop it falling, and gazed around at the world from his higher vantage point. He felt as if he were right on top of the fortress, that it should be here, that he should be able to see it. He turned back towards the mountain that rose a good seven hundred metres or so in front of him. There was a rocky outcrop about two hundred metres away, clearly visible against the rays of failing sunlight, so he headed in that direction.



It wasn't a hard climb, not by anyone's standards, but there was no path and the incline did steadily steepen. Harry was struggling for breath in the cold air as he pulled himself up and over onto the outcrop of rock, aside a long cliff face. He had an impressive view of the surrounding area, he could see everything except the one thing that mattered.

"It's here," he repeated. "Just hidden."

Tired from the events of the last day or so, and frustrated at his lack of success now, Harry sat down with his legs dangling off the edge of the outcrop. He wished he brought a bottle of water with him, and then shrugged and picked up a chunk of clean snow and sucked on that. It was cold, but it would do.

The world really was empty up here, as far as he could see. Nothing was anywhere. There were no animals, no humans, no sound. He gazed up into the orange sky, as the sun had begun to set, and sighed. It was way too early for the sun to be setting at this time of year. Another sign that everything was shutting down, that the machine that ran everything had a few screws loose.

*Three o'clock*, he thought. *It would be about three o'clock, and yet I can see a star.*

Ironically enough, that star was actually Mars, the Planet of War. Harry smiled wryly and continued his search of the countryside.

It was mostly white, white ground covered in snow - and green. There was green under the white tops of the forest. But nothing to mark the location of the fortress he felt was here... *knew was here*. He briefly wondered if Tom Riddle had had this same problem, and perhaps had sat on this very outcrop looking as well.

Stranger things have happened.

He cast another glance out over the distant loch, the nearby forest, and the sides of the mountain. Nothing, and yet....

*There's something....* he thought with surety. *I've seen something but....*

He looked again, across the entire landscape - all the miles of it. He had seen something, something out of place, something that made sense but was out of place - wasn't right. He stood up to get a better look at the area, throwing aside his chunk of snow as he did.

*Snow....*

As soon as he stood he saw it.

About a quarter of a mile away, hidden in plain sight - or perhaps not hidden as the case may be - was a patch of ground about one hundred metres wide, as best he could tell from his vantage point above it. This ground was rocky and had a sprinkling of grass and wouldn't have looked out of place at all if it weren't for the....

*Snow.*

There was no snow on that ground, not a flake of the white powder. It was a perfect circle undisturbed by the snow. Harry grinned - he knew he'd found the entrance to the Fortress, and all it took was a little thought. He had begun to think he might need to level the mountain to find it - and that wasn't ever truly out of the question.

The climb down the side of the mountain was a lot easier than on the way up, but also more hazardous. Harry fell more than once on the slippery snowy hillside. Back on near-level ground he headed in the direction of the snowless circle, readying his power just in case. He could feel it building towards the palms of his hands, and relished that feeling - as if the world was in the palm of his hand. *Incredible.*

The wind swept his unmanageable, bloody and more than a little dirty hair in every direction as he crossed the quarter mile distance across the face of the mountainside. The sun had fallen further over the horizon and it was beginning to get cold. When it shouldn't have been. Harry closed in on the anomaly on this landscape.

"Christ...." he breathed, as the strength of the repelling charms seemed to treble. He steeled himself against it, and moved on, each step forced now.

He could see why, in a thousand years, no one had ever come close to finding Slytherin Fortress. For one thing, its location had never been known, for another, the strength of these charms was enough to drive anyone but the rightful heir away. Voldemort would probably feel drawn to it, if anything. Of course Harry's power level helped him identify and neutralise those charms. It was tough, he wasn't entirely sure what he was doing, but it was enough.

At first glance, the circle of ground was normal across and around its entire radius. It was covered with sparse grass and a few dead shrubs, alone with half a dozen rocks and a scattering of pebbles. Nothing out of place, nothing out of the ordinary except for the lack of snow - and that meant everything.

A ripple of power, deep and ancient, surged through Harry as he stepped off the snow and onto the clear ground. The wind died down immediately, the charms trying to repel him did as well. For a moment he felt as if the entire world had sucked in a deep breath, and wasn't about to let it out.

"Suspenseful," Harry muttered with a wry smile. He had stepped over the threshold, and not a thing had happened to reveal the location of the Fortress. "Big build up for nothing...."

There were differences though, if that was the right word. It *felt* different within this circle of ground, there seemed to be more history here. Harry could feel it, stretching back a thousand years.... almost like he was there, but not quite. As if all he had to do was turn his head, look at the space from a different angle, and it would all become clear. He tried that, and there was nothing.

Walking back and forth and around the rocky circle, Harry was frowning. After five minutes of fruitless searching for anything he sighed and sat down on the nearest flattop boulder, resting his chin on the palm of his hand.

"Waste of time...." he muttered, rubbing his eyes with his other hand, he was beyond tired now - beyond almost anything except guilt and regret.

Seeing Ron dead had shaken him, more than anything else that had happened since March 20<sup>th</sup>, and that included entering a completely new universe, and playing a big part in bringing all of existence down by its ear. What could be said to that?

Ron, with his throat torn out. Dead, lifeless and somewhat accusatory eyes staring glazed upon him - more than chance, that one. For the first time Harry began to worry that he may never see his best friend ever again. Hell, anyone he knew or cared about again. He intended to meddle in things that no one had ever meddled in, and the risk that it carried was beyond measure.

*And I'm so tired*, he thought dejectedly. *So goddamn tired....*

Vaguely, Harry noticed that he had been tracing a line along a crack in the stone he was sat upon. He looked down towards the crack and was instantly struck by its uniformity. It wasn't a crack, but a deep gouge cut into the rock. He stood up.

There was dust, sandstone or limestone he wasn't sure, but there was dust concealing an image upon the face of the stone, and a few strokes with his hand cleared it away, revealing the clearest sign towards the fortress than anything else so far.

The image cut into the stone was that of a snake. A snake devouring its own tail in a never ending cycle that was sometimes used to depict eternity. The snake was carved so perfectly, and magic had preserved it, that it had a presence about it, and the stone eyes seemed to pierce the soul.

Harry had been here before, at the entrance to another one of Slytherin's hidden wonders, and knew what to do.

Concentrating, as it had been quite a few years since he had done it, Harry imagined the snake was real - which wasn't hard because it felt real - and whispered in a tongue he heard as English, but which sounded to foreign ears as a series of low, slick hisses.

Parseltongue.

"Open," Harry hissed, his voice taking on a life of his own. Nothing happened. "Reveal... Slytherin.... Open sesame.... Basilisk.... Gryffindor?"

Harry ceased hissing and wiped his brow of the thin band of sweat that had developed, looking around for any change in the landscape, or for the appearance of a fortress. Neither had happened.

The light had faded so much that it was now twilight, twenty minutes or so until the sun fully set. Harry stared with a frown at the snake-rock, and cursed low under his breath. "What does it want?" he whispered.

With no better idea in mind, Harry knelt down on his knees and grasped the rock under a small outcropping under its surface. With a deep breath, he lifted it a full seven inches off the ground, before dropping it back down with a dry thud and a wince of pain as the old wound in his shoulder, from his own sword, twinged in remembrance. Never fully heal that one.

But that was forgotten as the eyes of the snake picture upon the stone surface glowed as green as the deepest emeralds, and faded to silver before returning to green. Progress had been made again.

*Parseltongue?* Harry wondered. *Why the hell not?*

"Slytherin," he hissed, no need to concentrate - that bloody snake was alive.

Viciously, Harry's world was turned upside down, his head was pulled every which way, he felt as if he had been pushed through a thin membrane of water and then doused in liquid hot flames. His skin burnt and there was no fire, his lungs screamed for air when there was air everywhere. He opened his eyes but they felt closed. Around him, the landscape - what he could glimpse of it - was changing with a rapidity that made him dizzy.

Then it was over, everything returned to normal, and Harry was *one thousand years* in the past, in a single moment of frozen time.

"Bloody hell," he breathed, stumbling and falling over backwards, almost splitting his skull open on the snake-rock.

Pulling himself to his feet, Harry looked around in vague amazement at the landscape around him. It had changed, that much was obvious, but there was little that excited Harry anymore.

It looked the same, for the most part, but there were differences. The forest was larger, almost four or five times its original size, its future size, and completely blocked out a view of the loch except for a thin stretch of it in the distance. There were a lot more trees, no snow, dozens more rocks.

The biggest change was, undoubtedly, the disfiguring black spike that rose nearly five hundred metres imbedded into the side of the mountain Harry had partially climbed about fifteen minutes ago. Over one hundred metres wide, purely black with spikes, turrets and parapets upon the balconies and rooftop, the fortress of Salazar Slytherin had been found by the heir of Gryffindor, after centuries of hiding in shadow.

It was a simple, cylindrical structure that was completely black right down to the spurs that jutted out on the top of the castle, forming a platform that was complete with hideous, deformed gargoyles that inspired fear on their own.

Harry stood unmoving next to the portal stone that had brought him to this moment in time one thousand years in the past. The perfect hiding place for the fortress. Time and space magic again, it all came back to that, but a brilliant idea nonetheless. It was brilliant, hiding the entire fortress within a pocket of time - such magic could be done, Harry knew, but it was intricate and damn near impossible. Slytherin would've been powerful.

It was instinct, and a measure of educated guesses, that led Harry to this conclusion about the fortresses true location. It was ingenious -

*Hiding the damn thing in a pocket of time, at one instant in all of time. Impossible to find, impossible without the right clue.*

The fortress was probably torn down the moment the time magic had been put into use. That way, it only existed at this moment, this second. And this second was frozen here, Harry could tell that much. It was dusk, just like it had been a thousand years into the future, but there was no wind, few clouds, no leaves rustling beyond how much they could have done within this brief second of frozen time.

*How do I know this?* Harry wondered, only for a moment. *A pocket of time... I'm right, but how?*

Answers for another time, if there was such a thing, when all was said and done.

It was then that Harry realised he was not alone, and he slowly unslung the automatic rifle from his shoulder, sighing as he raised it before him.

"Ginny...." he whispered. "Ginny."

In this moment of time, the portal snake-rock was on a slight elevated rise, that let down to the visible entrance of the dark towering fortress about a quarter of a mile away. In this moment of time, there was a clear dusty path, two dozen paces wide, leading right up to that entrance. There were all manner of.... obstacles.... upon that path. And probably many more that Harry could not see.

"Let's do it all again...." he breathed, silently wishing that one day, somehow, his need to defend himself by taking another's life would be over. He was already swimming in the blood of the dead, and eventually he would drown - that was inevitable. What could stand against inevitability?

Harry took a single step, destiny stepped with him, her shadow shrouding Harry and battling to bend his will to her own. It was an unimaginable battle, especially because Harry's will could not be bent. He chose what he did now, he chose his own fate.

The sky was partially darkened, a few glittering stars shined down in an endless loop within this moment of time, the land was mostly silent, the large fortress before Harry leant down threateningly, its shadow stretching across the twilight for at least a mile - whilst the final

remnants of the Dark Lord's army moved to intercept the lone hero upon his path to the fortress.

Death Eaters, those not killed the previous evening maybe, and a handful that had remained at the fortress to guard it, were spaced out evenly along the quarter mile path. Harry couldn't count their exact number, as there may have been more in the trees or alongside the dark creatures that he could see and sense in strategic places up to and around the path and fortress. He hazarded a guess at about thirty five Death Eaters, maybe less. Thirty five to be safe, to give him that edge.

"And vampires... maybe," he whispered. The sense, or whatever it was, felt like a prickling in the back of his mind - like seeing something familiar and not knowing what it was exactly, the name on the tip of your tongue. Harry could sense the dark creatures, feel their evil, but what they were or how many was indistinguishable from the whole sense.

Hard steps, gravel and dust crunching underfoot, Harry swung his rifle in a one hundred and eighty degree arc, peppering the area with a spray of precisely aimed spheres of energy. He did this just as curses were fired upon him - fired upon him again.

*Perhaps it'll never end, he thought. Perhaps it'll always be about killing....*

Knowing what he had to do now didn't help matters, it made them worse. He had to mow through this lot, claim another thirty lives, to take one step closer to that final, apocalyptic battle that was always just on the horizon.

The Death Eater assault was strong - calculated, arranged. Harry had gone fifty metres down the path when a rain of deadly curses, jinxes and hexes poured down upon him. He sidestepped most of them with a speed that was uncanny, matched by only a few, his armour deflected many, some went wide, and some did hit him.

His rifle churned with semi-automatic fire, driving home shot after shot. Three Death Eaters went down over a range of one hundred metres, Harry catching a severing charm on his right knee, which tore



through the denim of his jeans and left a rough gash which began to bleed unnoticed down his leg.

Screams, shouts of spells, whistling of curses, bangs of explosions in the dirt and surrounding forestry did not faze Harry as he made his slow approach, doing so with a calm that was nothing short of terrifying.

*Are you ready for the real fight, Potter?* Allarius asked, and Harry was immediately on full guard, his magic beginning to pool in his palm.

*What?*

*This Death Eater scum is a waste of you talents, of your power. The world is very thin here, very thin. Let's see how you stand against an assault by my forces, by the demon army. I can send them through by the dozen here... have fun!*

Harry gritted his teeth, his palm exploding in a blast of pure blue and white light, stretching up to his elbow, flowing through his veins and drowning his mind. A calm deeper than his already settled demeanour washed over him like an oceanic wave, and all he saw was the enemy - no emotion, nothing. He could work best that way.

It came quicker now, even as the vampires appeared in the shadows alongside the road. It was dark enough for them to fight, but only just. They screeched and lunged at Harry with a fury to rival anything Allarius was about to send.

Shots of energy, by the dozen, exploded out of the rifle at a rate of six per second, Harry's finger keeping the trigger constantly suppressed. He was multitasking now, the calm in his mind making the tasks simple. He fired at the greatest threats, cutting a path through, dodged when he had to, and was always alert for more.

"Darkslayer...." the vampires hissed, their ancient legend brought to life in the form of a seventeen year old boy, with the will to survive, to do right, to *never say die*.

Lucius Malfoy, aside his son Draco, both unmasked and firing Killing Curses towards Harry, went down in a hail of spherical light. Harry

wasn't surprised he felt little to no emotion about this. Some things just were.

Bleeding from over half a dozen new wounds, nothing overly serious, Harry's palm exploded with beams of electric-fire, deep throbbing blue that rent trees in half, left deep gouges in the gravel and dirt path, and simply annihilated anything that was unfortunate enough to gain the attention of the Boy Who Lived.

Harry had advanced maybe three hundred metres since the portal snake-rock, and a trail of bloody, gritty destruction followed in his wake. Wake turbulence, to say the least, generated by the muzzle of a weapon, and the need to do what is inherently good.

Flames licked at the forest, at the bodies upon the road, at Harry's feet. Blue flames, clean flames, greasy flames, orange flames. Curses were stopped before they left lips, and many of the remaining Death Eaters began to turn tail and run.

It was then that reality began to tear open, the darkness of the Boundary seeping in and creating doorways into the demon hold. Just like in Tyndrum, the air bent and fizzled, stretched and sucked. Demons of all shapes, of all grotesque forms began to pour out of the increasing number of holes in front of Harry, and above him.

"Well I didn't want it to be too easy," he sighed, and increased his power.

The rifle, not really effective anymore, he tossed aside. No sooner had he done that than his right arm exploded into blue flames, with a core of deep throbbing white light.

Disfigured monstrosities, mounted demons, hideous husks of flesh were advancing towards Harry, as he was burning through the vampires and few remaining Death Eaters on this part of the path. Emotion didn't bother him, doubt couldn't gnaw at him, power... consumed him.

"I WANT IT TO END!" he screamed, not knowing why. Not anymore or who he was screaming to. His power, the blue electric-fire tore into humans, demons, dark creatures. Rending them limb from limb,

sometimes simply disintegrating them, leaving smoky piles of ash. "AAAHHH!"

Harry screamed, loud and deep. He drowned out everything, the crackles of his power, the cries of the demons and the smells of death. He didn't notice the ground shaking underneath his feet, as the demons worked their own rudimentary magic against him.

Not entirely similar to human magic, demon magic manipulated the elements to some degree. Air was used to slow Harry down in his onslaught, to decrease his movements as it buffeted him from all sides. The large, armless demons controlled the power. Earth was used around his feet, attempting to trip him up, or open a chasm to swallow him. There weren't enough demons to work and do that, but that wasn't through lack of trying.

The few Death Eaters and vampires between Harry and the demon horde were trapped between two powerful aggressors. Some of the Death Eaters turned to fire upon the newly appeared demons, even as their gateways into this world were closing. The demons killed with rage and fury tripling their strength, tearing Death Eaters apart.

The vampires, the few remaining, took flight with their dark, decaying wings - heading back over Harry's head towards the portal stone back into the world outside of this time bubble.

And, of course, the large dark fortress still loomed ahead.

Bleeding, sweating, fatigued, all but dead, Harry continued his slow, oh so slow, walk towards Slytherin Fortress - demon magic pulling at him, his own magic cutting their lines in half. The scary thing about that though was that Harry was holding back his main strength - for fear of what it would do. Bring down the fortress, would probably be a good guess if that happened.

*Are you afraid of your power, Harry?* Allarius asked, laughing hysterically. He did not seem to be bothered by the slaughter of his demons in the least. Harry tried to ignore him, but he was persistent

*I'm afraid of the damage I can do with it, yes,* he finally replied. With that said, he pushed the demon from his mind with hardly any effort on his part, the magic intensifying for the task.

The rips in the air had sealed themselves quite effectively, after letting forty or so hideous creatures to make their way into this world. Harry steeled himself against their magic, keeping his footing steady and his arm movements fast to avoid their nets of air. His arms glowed with pure power.

*Where does it come from?* he thought tiredly, a demon exploded in a star of blood and flesh, the ground springing alight as it was coated in the refuse.

The basilisk armour had kept him alive this time, keeping his chest and most of his upper body supremely protected. Harry thought it quite funny that he was wearing Slytherin's basilisk to capture Slytherin Fortress. *Irony*, he thought, and, once again, moved on.

Within this bubble of time it never got any darker than twilight, or any lighter than that, and this faint light, marked by the sun sinking in a permanent position on the horizon, made all of their shadows stretch out far behind them, the lights and colours of power deepening or swallowing this effect.

The fortress was barely two hundred metres ahead of Harry now, a long trail of fiery destruction burning behind him upon the path to its doors. Between him and it were perhaps two dozen insane creatures, hell bent on ending his life in any way possible. Harry could see a lone Death Eater running through the doors of the fortress and marked him for when he reached the doors.

His attention on the demons now, Harry threw his palms together, both glowing, and they slipped away like two opposing magnets, creating a wave of raw power that towered over anything the demons could do with the air. They were all blown off their feet, biting and slashing at one another in their fury and haste to kill.

*Is it war you're waging, Harry? War against me, against Evil, against Death? Tell me honestly now, boy,* Allarius whispered, his voice reaching even the darkest corners of Harry's troubled mind.

Harry frowned, his hands exploding with blue fire that ravaged the fallen demon horde. Screams of pain, of fury, of misery tortured his ears, but he felt no remorse for killing these creatures that should never have been given the right to exist anyway. Nothing so horrendous should be allowed to exist, nothing so bloodthirsty.

*Why do you ask?* Harry replied.

Allarius smiled, Harry felt it. *No one has ever waged war and won, Harry. There are no winners in such a thing. The losers die and the victors dig the graves. Why not just let it end? Existence is circling the drain now, stop defying it.*

Harry sighed within his mind, but remained strong, unavertable. He always would. *I'm going to stop the destruction, stop the madness, STOP YOU! And then I'm going home to deal with Voldemort...*

*And after that?* Harry felt the slow, cruel smile growing across Allarius's face, from wherever he was within the Stream and Boundary.

The demons, trapped in a flaming pit of their own hate and misused magics, Harry's unmatched raw power eating away at them, finally began to die, their own blood and flesh adding to the intensity of the flames, those life-consuming flames.

*And after that,* Harry swallowed hard. *Death or Ginny.*

The coppery taste of magic was heavy upon the air as the charred remains of forty demons smoked and burned, the flames from their empty husks spreading quickly over the dry reedy grass and into the forest. It would burn to the ground, a sea of fire around the tall spike of the fortress.

There were no more enemies now, no more screaming, no more dying. Ten minutes maybe, ten long minutes that felt like hours and it was all over. Harry had survived, again. His magic was still an enigma - and all his enemies were either dead or had fled. He felt nothing one way or the other.

"It doesn't just destroy...." he whispered, thinking of the field of roses beneath the Astronomy Tower he had created with his magic. It wasn't always used in violence. A large part of that thought kept Harry honest and struggled to keep him sane.

There was no wind in this time dome, in this pocket of history used to conceal Slytherin's fortress, but the ash around Harry's feet as he took the next few steps towards the towering black spike swirled up around him, crushing underfoot and making him cough.

It was silent now it was all said and done, for the most part anyway. A trail of destruction lay in Harry's wake, terrible destruction, all caused with a wave of his hand. Deep gashes had been torn into the earth, gravel was spread everywhere, dust hung in the air mixed with the smoke of the many multicoloured fires. It was just another day.

"Ow...." he groaned, taking a few deep breaths, and continuing his walk towards the fortress entrance. Now that the heat of the fight was done, he began to feel the wounds and fatigue that had otherwise gone unnoticed. He walked with a limp in his left leg from one or two fairly deep cuts. He was dizzy, thirsty, and tired. And yet he moved on.

Two painful minutes later, and Harry stood before the large, iron doors - one hundred feet high, barred and locked with ancient magic, powerful modern spells and from just the pure strength of the metal that was in their making.

The magic had retreated once again, like the tide of the ocean after a wave crashes, but Harry's palm was still aglow. Concentrating on what he wanted, as that was almost all he had to do now, he raised his palm against the heavy, immovable doors. A beam of white power struck them dead centre, and the ancient iron began to melt like butter.

\*~\*~\*~\*

Glen sat impatiently behind the wheel of the ATV, tapping his fingers nervously on the leather and metallic steering wheel. He glanced almost ever second towards the path within the eaves of the snow covered forest that Harry had disappeared into nearly two hours ago now.

Sucking his teeth with indecision, Glen opened the door to the truck and stepped out into the cool night. Night it was, even though his watch only read four o'clock. It shouldn't even begin to get dark for another four hours, at least, and yet a universe of stars wheeled overhead, and the moon swam across the sky.

He looked towards the forest again, pushing his glasses up onto the bridge of his nose. All those years of army training called out to him, told him to go after Harry, just to grab a weapon and head on in. If a soldier is going to die he should do so in battle.

"The whole damn thing is messed up," he grunted, and went to the side door of the truck, reaching in through the open window for an assault rifle.

Limping from the pain of arthritis in his left hip and down the side of his leg, Glen put on a thick all-weather coat, slung the rifle over his shoulder and set off towards the forest. Coughing, his breath visible on the air from the increasing cold, Glen followed the path to the first trees on the edge of the wood.

He looked back once towards the truck, sitting silently in the darkness - its silhouette clearly visible, and then turned into the impenetrable darkness ahead of him, unslinging his rifle and flicking on the mounted torchlight as he did.

\*~\*~\*~\*

Liquid hot metal, burning in smoking pools upon the gravel and hard compact dirt path sizzled and resolidified within seconds of being melted - almost as soon as its heat source was taken away, the pooling iron hardened and Harry stepped over it and through the hot gap he had burnt in the thick doors.

Darkness was what he was expecting, and he was not disappointed. Pitch black darkness and a feeling of dampness were Harry's first sensations upon entering the ancient fortress. He could only see about ten feet ahead of himself, the pale light coming in through the hole in the door not nearly enough. It highlighted rough cut stone, and smooth panelled walls.

Showing he was not afraid in the least, Harry conjured a fair few balls of light to float ahead of him down the corridor, and to swirl around him in a changing pattern. This lit up the corridor all the way to the heart of the fortress, but it didn't make it any less cold.

Harry knew Voldemort, Ethan Rafe... or whoever he was here, and Ginny were in the tower. He also knew there was at least one Death Eater, having seen the man enter. All the others were either burning outside or had fled from Harry's wrath through the portal stone back out into regular time.

Harry took a few steps forward and they echoed down the corridor like hammer blows. He didn't care, if they were smart enough most would stay away from him. He could also feel, sense, the hundreds of dark creatures that must live beneath the massive fortress, within a network of tunnels that stretched for miles underneath this tall spike. He thought they'd be sealed in, as he couldn't feel anything above the ground, but it is always better to be safe than sorry.

He hesitated only once, before summoning the sword of Gryffindor into existence. It appeared in his right hand and shone like a beacon in the darkness. It was only one small step further to lighting the blade up with power, enough to level a mountain. Harry refrained, seeing madness that way.

Hurried footsteps reached his ears from up ahead, and Harry thought he saw the shadows move, or something within them move. His eyes narrowed and he walked with increasing awareness down the poorly lit corridor.

*Where would Voldemort be?* Harry wondered, not really wanting to search every room of every floor within this massive tower. He wrinkled his nose at the smell of mildew and decay.

He caught the sound of footsteps again, somewhere up ahead, and dimmed the magical lights around himself, plunging his form into shadow. The corridor was, so far as he could tell, long and narrow for several hundred metres ahead. There were no doors on either side of him, just plain sandstone walls. Harry realised that this was one of those structures that was bigger on the inside than out.



It could take him days to search all of it... unless he had a guide.

There were no longer any footsteps up ahead, but Harry closed his eyes and cleared his mind, listening with all his strength. The corridor was dark beyond sight up ahead, but Harry could hear - just - panting, of something struggling to breath quietly. He smiled, and put away the sword just out of sight. It disappeared silently.

Whispering softly, softly enough so as not to be heard, Harry conjured a piece of stone - simple, flat and light - a pebble, and smoothed it out with his fingers. Glancing once more into the darkness ahead of him, trying to discern the location of the man he knew was ahead, Harry tossed the pebble over and across to his left.

It clattered loudly in the silence of the corridor, loud enough for Harry's purpose. The Death Eater ahead, clearly frightened but having no other option, broke cover at the sound of that pebble.

*"AVADA KED--"*

A wand tip shone dark green in the darkness ahead of Harry, and with a thought he tore the wand from the hand of the wizard holding it. It clattered uselessly away on the ground. Stepping forward, Harry seized the man with his mind, raising him above the stone floor and held him in place.

Light roared around Harry as the man screamed at being caught, he twitched and turned in the air, fighting pointlessly against the invisible magical bonds that held him. He was gibbering inaudibly by the time Harry approached.

"Shut up," he growled, recognising the fear in the man's eyes. He obeyed quickly.

The man himself wasn't familiar. An aging man with streaks of grey in his sweaty black hair, he was short, with an angular face and terrified brown eyes. He was sniffing in fear as Harry appraised him with a cold, emotionless gaze.

*"P-Please let m-me--"*

"Where is Voldemort?" Harry cut in, his palm springing to life again.

The man sobbed.

"P-please d-don't kill me...."

"Don't make me ask again," Harry growled, raising his glowing palm this time.

The man continued to twist against his bonds, shaking his head with fear and pain. "I can't... the Dark Lord, he'll- he'll kill me."

Harry didn't blink. "I'll kill you if you don't take me to him--now."

Harry released the man from his bonds of air and he fell in a crumpled heap at his feet, whining as his elbow hit the wall. Shakily, he got to his feet - glaring hate and fear at Harry.

"Make your choice," Harry said, the glow in his palm intensifying. "You take me to him, and I'll let you go. Whatever happens then is up to you. Perhaps you'll grow a backbone and help, or turn and flee. That's your choice."

The man winced, not meeting Harry's eyes. He shuffled on his feet in a rat like way, and then slowly nodded. Without a word, he turned and began to step back down the corridor at a quick pace. Harry summoned lights to swirl around him, keeping him visible as well as lighting the way. The man flinched at this.

Black robes moving around him and shuffling loudly in the silence of the fortress - a silence broken only by heavy breathing and falling feet - the man quickened his pace to almost a run, anxious most likely to get it all over with, one way or another.

Harry jogged to keep up, only once telling him to slow down. As far as he could tell in this darkened uniformity, they were still upon the main corridor, with the high domed ceiling and sandstone walls. Not another corridor branched off and not one door was visible as they ran.

Five minutes, maybe more and maybe less, and they were still jogging passed grimy sandstone on this never ending corridor. Harry called a stop and asked,

"How far is it?"

The man flinched, rubbing his hands together nervously. His face was a mask of sweat, his eyes darting around as if fearing death from every shadow. "N-Not much f-farther. Stairs, all the way up... h-he's at the top."

Nodding, Harry waved for the man to continue and they did. True to his word, however stuttered it was, the corridor finally ended in a flight of thick black steps that rose up only into darkness. The man stepped onto the first one, but Harry pulled him back.

"How far? And how long?" he asked.

The man shook his head, hazarded a nervous smile and then flinched at the look upon Harry's face. "Many flights," he said, swallowing audibly. "Half an hour, maybe less. Long way up to the top...."

"Are there any other Death Eaters here?" Harry asked, raising his glowing palm for effect.

Stifling a sob, the man quickly shook his head. "You killed them all," he grunted.

Harry pushed him roughly to get him going.

The stairs were many, and the darkness almost absolute. It seemed to press in on the small circle of light Harry's magical spheres offered, fighting to defeat it - but perhaps that was to be expected. As for the stairs, possibly every three hundred or so a corridor branched away to the left, as they circled up the tower that way. Harry tried counting the steps on the way up, but gave up when he reached seventeen hundred.

Their slight jog slowed to a walk as the stairs continued. It was impossible to run up them all, and Harry's legs weren't in the best of shape anyway. Sleep pulled at him, and his wounds ached with pain.

He never let the Death Eater see that though - didn't want him getting any ideas.

Ten minutes later and Harry called a halt, binding the man with magic to keep him from running. He sat down against the wall on one of the black stone steps and ran a hand down the side of his leg, above the blood encrusted and torn jeans. He struggled to recall the few healing charms he knew, and in the end managed to make one or two of the bruises fade, and heal the deep gash aside his left knee. He felt better almost immediately.

From outside of the fortress the structure had appeared to be about five hundred metres high - half a kilometre. Impressive, but not overly large. Harry knew, ten minutes later, that they'd gone up at least three times that.

Five minutes more of step after rising step, and the floor levelled out after what felt like hours. Torches were lit periodically along the walls up here, held in brackets and glowing magnificently. Ahead, about two hundred feet away, a large pair of solid, polished oak doors were barred with a serpent emblem crossing their width.

Harry smiled and turned to the Death Eater that had brought him here. "Is that it?" he asked.

The man wouldn't glance at the door, but he nodded nervously. "Y-you said I could go when."

"Get out of my sight," Harry spat, turning away and hearing the man practically leap back down the stairs. His footsteps faded away to nothing as Harry advanced towards the large set of doors. Torchlight flickered within his mismatched eyes, and another eerie calm flooded him.

Harry paused for the last time before the doors that led to the answer to the question he had come so far to learn. Was this Ginny alive? If she wasn't, then that would mean Firenze had been right all those months ago. If she was.... then that was terrible. It was a hard choice, having to learn one way or another.

It was like playing chess, learning to sacrifice certain pieces for the good of the whole. It wasn't right, it couldn't be. Gambling with life to achieve his own ends, however noble and fate driven they may have been.

Gazing up pensively at the giant metallic snake emblem upon the door, Harry realised he was biting his bottom lip and stopped it, smiling and shaking his head. He was nervous.

"Get a grip, Potter," he whispered. "Get a grip and go see the body...." A tear fell down his cheek unnoticed, running a line through the grime and blood.

Looking down at his feet, Harry took in a deep breath and let it out again. Then he blasted the doors clean off their hinges, breaking the oak into a thousand splinters that exploded inwards. The giant metal snake twisted and bent. His palm barely glowed this time, and he stepped into the room with splinters of wood still falling around him.

Clattering against a stone parapet, a column of raised black marble, the snake emblem was twisted around its length from the pure force of Harry's strength. Smoky remains of the door clunked against the dark marble floor as well. Harry eyed his surroundings quickly, noting his location, the hazards, and a hundred other things.

The first thing he noticed was the twilight sky overhead, with its unmoving cumulus clouds and pale stars; he was back outside... well, almost. He stood atop of the fortress upon the roof of the structure. Black marble parapets rose in towering columns above him in a wide circle with few balconies and ledges, some depicting hideous gargoyles.

There was no ceiling, the roof open to the clear unchanging sky. Unchanged in the thousand years it had been frozen within this moment of time. It cast an orangey light upon the parapets and stone.

Harry lowered his gaze, and his eyes narrowed. His pace stopped as he saw the two figures across the way - one seated upon a black marble throne, the other standing to the side and behind, almost hidden in the shadows. His eyes fell further, and his heart stopped when he saw the third figure, fallen in the centre of the floor.

"Potter," a cold, hissing voice called from the high backed throne seat across the expanse of the roof. "You've come this far, don't hesitate now."

Harry vaguely heard what was said, but as he resumed his pace, he kept his eyes only on the sprawled out figure upon the marble stone, unmoving... not breathing. Nothing else mattered, perhaps nothing else ever would matter. It was his worst nightmare come to life, in another world within a different universe.

Ginny Weasley lay dead on the ground in front of him.

Eyes glazed over with death stared lifelessly at Harry, or so it seemed to him. Hours passed in dreadful seconds, the blurry reflection of his torn and abused form visible in those eyes. Pale skin and silky hair formed the rest of her face, a few strands crossing the bridge of her nose. Harry slowly fell to his knees in front of her.

"You see the price of defiance now, Harry," the Dark Lord Voldemort hissed.

VOLDEMORT! It always came back to that monster. Tom Riddle, the Dark Lord Voldemort. Harry had crossed worlds and universes and no matter, the most painful moments in his life were always brought back to the hand of Voldemort. He couldn't escape them; mayhap he was doomed never even to have the chance to.

On his knees before Ginny's body, Harry couldn't help but think of her as the one he had loved. *Did love*, he told himself, but even that wasn't certain anymore. Nothing could be with so much on the line. Nothing could be when everything had to be.

Tentatively, Harry brushed a strand of her auburn hair away from her face, and closed her eyes along with his own. He moved his hand back and tried to prevent the tears from falling. In that, at least, he succeeded.

Head still hanging down, mind nearly broken beyond anyone's standard of integrity, Harry did not see the cloaked and hooded figure of the Dark Lord stand, and raise his wand not forty feet away.

"AVADA KEDAVRA!"

Harry sighed when he heard the curse, and for one brief moment he wondered about letting it hit him, ending it and dooming existence. A wry smile spread across his face at this thought though. *Knowing my luck it won't kill me and just hurt a lot.*

In the blink of an eye, as the first cold tendrils of the curse began to buffet him, Harry was on his feet, glittering sword in hand and a scream of power issuing from his mouth. Inches away, the green light split as the long blade defied it and blue raw power surged up the length of the precious metal, setting the sword alight.

The beam of the green Killing Curse broke as it hit the edge of the sword, splitting into two dozen equal jets that stream passed Harry on all sides, deflected by the sword. For a moment he was encased within all the streams, and then they struck the stone behind him, bringing one column down in a hail of stone and dust.

Throughout all of this, Harry had not looked up once, but now he did. He looked up just in time to see Voldemort's eyes widen in surprise, and for Ethan to run out from the shadows behind the throne to join his father. Harry stepped around Ginny's body and assumed a protective stance in front of it. He could do that, at least.

Anger came next.

*Ginny is dead... will be dead... and live again,* his mind was close to snapping. It was all too much. Too confusing, too.... too painful. His magic exploded unlike it had ever before, and the blade roared with renewed power, his arms the same, and there were even blue sparks erupting painlessly from Harry's odd eyes.

He moved the blade through the air diagonally, and the throbbing of the power nearly burst his eardrums it was so deep and loud. Flames, searing hot and blazingly bright surged up and down its length, and with an insane smile, Harry grasped the hilt with both his hands, even as the two wands were raised against him.

"We're all going down together," Harry smiled, and then pointed the blade towards the marble at his feet. With a cry of strength and of building power, he thrust the blade into the stone.

The power that flowed from the blade and the strength of the impact cracked the tower down to its very foundations, and the whole structure shook as it was set on the path of destruction.

Voldemort and Ethan stumbled, just as Harry pulled his blade out of the stone. With a thought he pulled the wand clean out of Voldemort's hand and advanced upon the Dark Lord, the Dark Lord who looked human in this world. Power crackled across his skin, surging through him in barely controlled amounts. Harry knew that if he let it go this tower would be destroyed in one amazing flash of searing hot light.

He wasn't even sure that that would kill him, either. So it remained an option.

Fiery red eyes sparked against Harry's green as he raised his sword above his head. On the edge of his sight he saw Ethan shouting a curse, his wand tip aglow. Harry threw his arm in a wild swing in his direction, and the wave of power that was generated threw Ethan back into a stone column, his wand falling from his grasp.

"Die, you bastard," Harry growled, one moment before he thrust his flaming blade down into the Dark Lord's flesh - as he tried to get out of the way. There was a surge of power down the length of the blade, and then Voldemort exploded. One madman dead in a universe of madmen.

Harry felt nothing but a grim satisfaction as he looked down at the smouldering remains of the Dark Lord. He swore he'd see his own Voldemort from this angle one day soon.

Still reeling from the power that had torn threw it, the tower shook and rocks that had held for a thousand years cracked and began to break loose. Behind Harry, a gargoyle fell and smashed in a cloud of dust.

*Time to leave, he thought. If the tower crushes that portal stone I may be stuck here....*



Harry turned, blade still glowing, and beheld Ethan struggling to stand, and trying to raise his broken wand arm. Fury and a need to kill blazed in his eyes, and Harry felt a stab of guilt. Ethan had been so much different in his own world. Everything had been so much different.

"Just die..." he spat. "POTTER!"

He charged at Harry, his hands balling into fists. Harry saw him coming, clutching his wand so hard, and reacted mercilessly in the end. He rushed forward to meet Ethan, moving in a blur and impaling the Dark Lord's son upon the blade in his hand. Ethan screamed and an explosion of blood from his mouth covered Harry's face, as he drove him back against the wall - sword still in his stomach.

Fury and hate were replaced by confusion, a look of deep regret and, surprisingly, a gripping of his wand even harder than he already was. Harry reminded himself that they had killed Ginny, a defenceless girl whom he couldn't help but love, and didn't remove the sword.

"This game's over for you," Harry said, the foundations of the fortress shaking underneath his feet.

Ethan scowled, and then, unbelievably, he laughed. "It will never be over, Potter. Not for you...."

His blood ran down the length of the dulled blade, staining it crimson red, and pooled around the hilt and over Harry's hand. He was shaken by what Ethan had said, it was too close to what Allarius had for comfort.

For a moment he lost concentration thinking these thoughts, and that moment was all Ethan needed. With a strength that Harry wouldn't believe the dying teenager still possessed, he screamed and levelled his wand between Harry's eyes in a split second.

*"AVADA KEDAVRA!"*

Time stopped, an hour was played over in a heartbeat, and a stream of pure white power erupted from Harry's open mouth in defence of its master. Milliseconds couldn't have been faster, as the beam of

pure green light, fired half and inch away, impacted against the white shield before Harry's face.

In his shock, as only a few seconds had passed, Harry let go of the sword and Ethan fell back onto his feet, stumbling, no longer impaled upon the blade within the wall. Before him he saw his own magic grappling for dominance with the thin white layer of Potter's. He growled and thrust all his energy left into killing him.

Harry felt sick, wanted to throw up from the evil he could feel in the curse trying to break through his flimsy shield and end it once and for all. He was within inches of Ethan's wand tip, inches within the boy himself, and it just became a battle of wills.

"AAHH!"

Harry wasn't sure which one of them screamed, he didn't see Ethan do it, and hadn't felt it if it was him. It took him a moment to realise it was actually the wand in Rafe's hand. It was splintering as the power of the curse hadn't been given a chance to fully leave the wand, and was straining from battle with Harry's thin shield.

Harry gritted his teeth, sweating profusely and seeing dark spots before his eyes, he shoved his remaining strength into forcing the Killing Curse back, and actually saw the curse sinking back into Ethan's wand for a moment.

Ethan wasn't done though, and he responded with a cry and pitted his own strength of will against Harry's. Minutes, hours, days, or years could have passed then, within those few seconds, as the power of the Killing Curse moved back and forth at the speed of light between Harry and Ethan.

The stone underneath their feet cracked, pulses of power emanated from the vortex growing around them, and the stone columns began to fall, shattering against the dome of power around the two of them.

Harry felt the magic grow hot, blazingly hot. Like the fires of a furnace as it was pushed back and forth between the two combatants. Ethan's wand hand was shaking, chips of the wand peeling away,

and Ethan himself was nearly dead, the sword still embedded through his stomach. Hate was keeping him alive now.

Fate was decided next.

Unexpectedly, the curse roaring between them became too hot and exploded along the point of greatest pressure. Shards of curse light ricocheted out in every direction, some stabbing Ethan others impacting against Harry's shield. It happened at the exact moment that Harry pushed forward with his own magic, and he pushed too much with nothing to push back.

Green light and white light hit Ethan, shot back and hit Harry. There was a massive eruption of power and behind them half of the roof was torn away and blown over the edge in huge boulders of marble. The fortress was tilting.

Harry screamed as his soul was torn and pushed by the Good of his own magic and the Evil of Ethan's. They merged; Harry could feel Ethan's heartbeat, see his mind, look through his eyes. Blinking became impossible and everything was hazy. They never moved an inch, either of them, and yet both felt as if they were thrown across a vast distant, hitting one another at top speed in the middle.

Unprotected by any shield, Ethan's physically body disintegrated into dust and ash. His mind was still there, pushing against Harry's. Whatever it was - spirit, soul, a fragment of Ethan - it began to slip into Harry's head, linked through the magic they had battled with.

Harry screamed, feeling the integrity of his own abused mind slip. He lurched forward, hit his head against stone, saw stars, and broke his sanity.

*Potter....*

An echo, deep, deep, deep below conscious thought. Atop of the shattering tower Harry ran in circles, screaming to the heavens or to anyone that would listen. He held his head, his sword appeared within his hand and disappeared into hiding again, and he screamed.

He saw everything and he saw nothing, memories that weren't his own poured over the ones that were. Atrocities committed by Ethan became his own, and were forgotten as the power pushed them back. But they kept coming.

Falling to his knees, he cried at the top of his lungs. "IT WILL NEVER BE OVER!"

Beneath him the tower crumbled, he lay hanging off the edge of a gaping hole in the floor that fell down for over a thousand metres into the fortress. He grit his teeth, struggling to remember who he was, where he was, what he was doing. What anything meant.

His fragile control over his awesome power slipped, and the top one hundred metres of the fortress was annihilated in a blast of pure white energy, Harry screaming in the centre of it as power poured out of him like sweat and blood. He was torn and ripped within the centre, lying on nothing as crackles of blue light surged into the white, and the destruction began.

"NOOOOOOOO!" He screamed, and clenched his fists, not knowing what was happening but knowing it wasn't good.

The sphere of magic in the air flickered and died, and Harry fell with nothing holding him up anymore.

The fortress was still falling, but Harry had been on the roof when his magic had eaten half of it, and now he fell unsupported the five hundred metres to the ground below. He didn't realise what was happening, could barely see and think of who he was. The air whooshed by his ears as he fell parallel to the remaining section of the fortress.

A lone figure falling through the twilight sky, debris and destruction falling with him as white and blue light flickered and died around him. Harry's scream sounded for miles, and no one and nothing heard it.

The impact drove him forty feet into the hard earth, his magic disintegrating a majority of it and cushioning his landing. Harry wasn't aware of any of this, as his strenuous hold upon his power failed and the land around him exploded and died in fire.

"NEVER BE.... OVER!" he cried, and then his leash upon the power snapped, and it was free.

A sphere of dark blue power grew around Harry, and darkened until it was almost black. He was aware, trapped within his mind and an imprint of Ethan's. His mind wasn't completely his own anymore. The sphere grew fast, feeding on the vast source of power within Harry.

Trees were flattened and then burnt to ash, rocks exploded, the fortress remains were obliterated. Nothing survived, and when the magic came into contact with the portal stone and the dome of time magic built around this patch of land, it fought for dominance.

A great hole in the sky opened, and darkness from one thousand years into the future poured in, as the pocket of time was torn away. Harry saw this but couldn't interpret it, his body bruised and broken. He also felt as if someone had driven a sword through his stomach.

*Got to... got to... stop....* his broken mind whispered, only vaguely understanding. Air gushed in through the widening gap in the time magic, and then an explosion, the last surge of power, cast aside the ancient magical nets and weaves. Harry fell back into his own time, the landscape changing around him within the space of a heartbeat.

He screamed, his throat cracked and throbbed, and yet he still screamed encased within the destruction of his magic.

*It has to end....*

***IT NEVER WILL!***

The mountain, snow covered and about nine hundred metres high, was next in the path of destruction, even as Harry's dome of power reached the forest he had walked through to get here. It was huge now, feeding off of Harry.

The growing sphere around him was unstoppable, sucking more power to keep itself alive from Harry. He could not rein it back in.

*I have to....*

Amazingly, he got to his feet within the white dome around him. He felt as if he were swimming in it, and technically he was. Raising his arms, he felt for the power. It was titanic, beyond measure, it was nothing compared to Harry's true potential. The sphere reached Loch Leven, water and sand from the bed disappearing, warping the ground into a massive crater that would not stop until there was no mass for it to destroy.

It would destroy this entire planet, and every second that past made it more difficult to stop.

Finally, at the end of his strength, his will, his consciousness, Harry fell silent - no longer screaming. His eyes closed and he swam within the power he was at the centre of. Wavering on his legs, he pooled power into his palms, and then clenched them with enough force to break the skin with his nails.

Bending in the air, the sphere of magic felt itself being cut off from its source, and began to drain away. Half a minute later, leaving barren wasteland as it sunk back down, a small figure, glowing white became visible at the sphere's heart. Harry shone, Harry cried, Harry was insane. With a final cry of defiance, the magic disappeared, and the cold of the night swept back in.

A second later, Harry collapsed....

\*~\*~\*~\*

Glen Thomas followed the trail of black roses through the forest, feeling out of sorts whenever he brushed one with his leg. They made him shake. It had been easy to track Harry through the darkness after the path had ended. There was a clear path through the field of black roses, a path that Harry had made by crushing as many of the evil flowers as he could.

He had been walking for about forty minutes, the cold and his leg slowing him down. There had been no sign of life in the forest, beyond the trees and flowers, and the darkness seemed to be deepening.

The forest hadn't looked this long when they were driving parallel to it on the other side of the Loch, and Glen began to wonder if he'd been going in circles. Those thoughts were pushed from his mind though, when the trees began to melt ahead of him.

"WHAT--?"

Glen cursed as a wave of hot air threw him to the ground, and a dazzling white light that silhouetted the trees up ahead shone and began to eat the forest. Frozen in fear and disbelief, Glen didn't move as trees were uprooted, roses were destroyed, and the edge of the light moved closer towards him.

He was dazzled by its brightness, and pinned to the ground by its emanating bursts of power. He gritted his teeth and closed his eyes, praying for it to stop--whatever it was.

It took minutes that felt like hours to Glen, but slowly he felt the white hot force of that power receding, and he pulled himself to his feet just in time to see the light fade about half a mile away, seeing as he was now on the edge of the forest, as it had eaten away the land right up until about four metres away from where he had fallen.

Gaping like a fish, Glen stumbled and fell to his knees again at the size of the crater in the earth around him. He thought maybe that a meteorite had hit... but no, it had to be Harry.

Rocks and massive boulders tumbled down the mountainside in chunks as big as houses, cracking the smoothed out hollow in the earth where the burst of power had been. Water poured in over the far edge of the crater, from the loch, creating a long, deep waterfall.

The boulders from the mountain tumbled that far down and impacted against this long waterfall. Glen couldn't see Harry anywhere, but he could hear something over the tumbling of rocks and the surge of falling water.

Screaming.

"...Never...."

It was faint and he almost didn't catch it, but Glen's old eyes scoured the destroyed landscape for the source. A flash of light caught his eyes down in the very centre of the newly formed crater, where a trickle of water from the liquid falling in from the loch had just reached. It was a few hundred metres away, possibly a kilometre.

"...Ethan...."

This scream was louder, but again he only barely heard it. Another flash lit up that area, and Glen set off at the fastest walk he could manage. The crater was filling up with water, and whoever was down there would drown if he didn't reach them first. Glen began to breathe heavily after fifty metres, rushing against the falling water that was filling the basin. It would already be ankle deep where he thought Harry was.

The ground he walked on was as smooth as glass, and as hard as stone. It had been shaped and cut to the finest degree by that power of a moment ago, and it sloped downwards towards the centre. As far as Glen could tell in the moonlight and that beam offered by his mounted torch, his path was clear all the way down to the heart of the crater.

It took him ten minutes, and by the time he reached the figure floating face down in the waist deep water, Glen was ready to collapse himself. Smoky tendrils rose up from the figures body, and every now and again his skin would glow pale white.

Tossing his rifle aside, Glen pulled the figure towards him through the freezing water. He shivered and heaved the floating figure onto his back. It was Harry, though he was barely recognisable - his face a mask of blood and bruises.

Glen, struggling for breath and shaking from the cold, tugged and pulled the boy into shallower water further up the face of the crater. Every time Harry glowed Glen felt his energy increase for just a moment, and it was this that allowed him to ignore the pain of his arthritis and pull the Boy Who Lived out of the fast-rising water.



Coughing though still unconscious, Glen sighed with relief as Harry chucked up some water out of his lungs and began to mumble incoherently.

"Harry," he said, gasping for breath and shivering. "You need to get up... I can't carry you all the way, son."

The water was already lapping at their heels again, and a boulder from the mountain crashed and tumbled by, the size of a small jeep, not ten feet away.

"ALLARIUS!" Harry suddenly screamed.

Glen jumped, and managed to pull Harry up another few feet, but his arms burned now, his old muscles at their limit.

"IT WILL END! Blood. BLOOD IS THE SACRI--"

Harry tossed and turned, his skin felt like fire and his eyes opened and closed, flashing unseeingly.

"Christ," Glen swore as the water level continued to rise in the crater. "Pull it together, son... or you'll die here."

"Ginny...." Harry sighed, writhing and tossing on the smooth earth. "Once upon a time, I loved you...."

Glen clutched a stitch in his chest, and leaned back, even as the water reached their knees. He couldn't do it, couldn't get himself and Harry back. But he couldn't leave the boy here to die either.

"Get up, Harry," he said, and hit him hard. Harry continued to mumbled, seeing but not seeing, and may as well have been dead right then.

Glen shook him, not ready to give up. He did this until he felt something moving behind him, and turned around, drawing the pistol from Harry's holster beside his right leg as he did.

There was nothing there....

*And yet.*

Just above the water, about twelve feet away, a doorway opened in the air. A blackness against the blackness of the night. Glen could see it clearly, the way the little light and air bent towards it. He raised the pistol, remembering quite clearly what came out of those doorways.

So it was somewhat of a surprise, when a large man stepped out of it and into the knee deep water.

Glen was terrified beyond rational thought for a moment, and then it faded as the man approached. His mind screamed that the approaching man was evil, that he should shoot and run, but he stayed by Harry. That boy inspired such terrible loyalty.

The man was neither young nor old. His eyes were dark, his face angular and brown and black hair fell to his shoulders. There was a smile on his face, and Glen was sure it marked insanity. He wore a simple black robe with a hood, his lips blood red shining with that madness.

Cold ate away at Glen's veins as he approached.

"What... who are you?" he asked. It didn't seem odd in the least that he asked this question in a crater filling with water, to a man that had just stepped out of the air.

The man, who felt more like a demon, knelt down on his heels next to Harry, not sparing Glen a single glance, and his smile faded.

"So much power...." the man whispered, and Glen nearly screamed when he saw vines with black rosebuds creeping out from under the man's boots. "And yet he resists it so."

The water level was lapping at Glen's waist, but that was forgotten now. He wanted to run, as hard and as fast as he could away from the man, leaving Harry to whatever fate. But he was frozen on the spot.

"Who are you?" he repeated, wishing his voice wasn't shaking so much.

Slowly those dark eyes that were tinged with red looked up and met Glen's. He wanted to scream again, as the blood red smile grew on the man's face.

"Call me Allarius, my good man," he said. "I'm an old friend of Harry's."

Glen didn't believe that for a second, but he said, "If you're a friend then perhaps you can help me carry him out of this crater. The water's rising and I can't do it myself--"

Allarius cut him off with a wave of his hand, and Glen realised he could no longer speak. Try as he might, no words came out.

"You've become necessary," Allarius smiled. "Harry here needs to be healed. We can't have our meeting in a few weeks time if he is not healed. His body and mind is broken, do you hear me, old man? His mind from the curse and his body from the impact into the earth."

Glen nodded with widened, fearful eyes. He still couldn't utter a single sound.

"When he wakes, tell him the Boundary no longer holds me, and that I can enter any world I wish. Tell him his plans will fail.... tell him it will never be over."

Laughing, the man, Allarius, stood, and Glen watched him wave his hand three times. He blinked, and he was sitting behind the wheel of the ATV, the chair comforting against his sore back.

He screamed in surprise, realised he could scream, and shivered in his wet clothes. Looking to his left, he saw Harry still unconscious in the passenger seat. He was sweating and bleeding, mumbling incoherently.

Sighing with relief, Glen rested his head against the wheel of the truck for a moment, just to gather his thoughts, and then turned the

key in the ignition. This was it now, he was done with magic and their wars. It was too much, he was done and over with it.

Glen looked at Harry again as he reversed back down the dirt track, and pain filled his chest. He didn't think that it was over for Harry, not yet, and perhaps it never would be. He had been fighting for years, that much Glen knew, and he had some powerful enemies. His fight wasn't over.

In fact, Glen thought that it may have only just begun.

\*~\*~\*~\*

## Chapter 22 - Crawling from Insanity and into Madness

*There is no coming to consciousness without pain*

*--Carl Jung*

*25 days until the Autumnal Equinox*

"....I will not tell lies...." Harry mumbled, his face marred with sweat and a deep set frown. "....Voldemort has him at the Department of Mysteries... a few steps from the Veil...."

Cool summer sunlight shone in through the high windows of the Hogwarts infirmary within the Hospital Wing. Beams highlighting dust particles in the air fell on the five companions standing almost helplessly around Harry's bed.

Three days, three days since Glen had brought him back from their... expedition. He hadn't woken, his injuries had been severe, and he did nothing now but mumble and scream incoherently and sometimes extremely confusing thoughts.

Albus Dumbledore stood at the foot of the bed, looking older and wiser than usual, not that his fifteen decades of accumulated knowledge did much good now - Harry was beyond their help, or so it seemed. The Headmaster glanced at his Matron, Madam Pomfrey, who shook her head frustrated, and then to Lily and James Potter, who looked shaken, and finally to the Muggle man Glen Thomas, who had definitely proven his worth in this world.

"What did this man tell you exactly, Mr. Thomas?" Dumbledore asked for what felt like the hundredth time.

"....I love you... I'll- I'll come back... somehow...." A tear fell down Harry's cheek, and his eyes flickered open unseeingly before closing again. "I don't know what... what love truly is... I never will...."

Glen stared at Harry with an infinite sadness, believing him insane and his mind broken. It was, he knew the... man... he had met in

those final minutes within the crater didn't lie. He looked up at Dumbledore.

"Not sure he was a man, to tell you the truth," Glen shrugged, rubbing his developing beard. "Didn't feel... he told me Harry's body and mind were broken, and that he was Harry's old friend."

"Anything more?" Lily Potter asked, having asked it near twelve times now.

Glen shook his head. "Just that he and Harry had a- a meeting, as he put it, in a few weeks time."

"No potions, no spells, nothing...." Madam Pomfrey hissed, clearly angry. "Nothing can heal his mind that I know of... it's like the madness brought on by Cruciatus, but deeper... dirtier."

Harry twisted and turned on the bed, now that his spine and legs had been set and healed. He had been paralysed for two days previously, but was doing well now. His basilisk armour was leaning against the bedside table, near his shrunken trunk; he was dressed in hospital pyjamas and his boxer shorts. He looked troubled, to say the least.

"...I tried.... but I'm so tired, so tired... white roses and the moon...." A bead of sweat worked its way down his forehead and over the bridge of his nose.

Glen sighed. "The man... whoever he was, also said it will never be over, not for Harry. I'm not sure what he meant but I believed it. If that boy's not healed... we'll all be sorry. He's got one hell of a fight ahead of him."

Lily shuddered. "Don't say that, Glen. Voldemort's been defeat--"

"It's a lot bigger than that," James whispered, shaking his head. "But I think it's all on Harry if he wants to pull himself out of this one. He's strong enough to... but what does he want?"

"I don't think he'd want to leave us all in danger, just because he's tired," Glen said. "I know that sounds a bit selfish on our part and a bit arrogant on Harry's, but it's the truth."

"...So many dead... I'm no better than him...."

"This is awful," Lily wept, the pain in Harry's voice striking a sharp chord deep within her heart. "What has he ever done to deserve this?"

Dumbledore cleared his throat, having been staring at Harry with a grave concern for a few minutes, he was almost hypnotised. "We must keep a watch on him, twenty four hours a day. Lily, James, find people you can trust - Sirius, Remus - and arrange it all. Harry is not safe."

"What makes you say that?" James asked, not arguing, just curious.

Dumbledore shook his head, perhaps slightly fearfully. "This man Mr. Thomas met; he is no longer bound by the rules concerning universe travel, according to what Harry has told me. There is nothing to stop him from entering this very hospital wing if he wants or needs to overcome him. He could simply step out of the air... keep a watch, James, and keep it well."

\*~\*~\*~\*

September

1<sup>st</sup>,

1997

21 days until the Autumnal Equinox

He took two steps forward, and the fragile dark glass floor beneath his feet shattered into a splintery spider web of cracks, before giving way entirely and plunging his shadowy form into a stream of memories that hurt more than any physical injury ever could.

Harry struggled for breath against this body of his own memories, this ocean of painful experiences and confusion. He struggled to stay afloat, to stay alive, to not have to relive every moment all over again. It was futile, as it had been the last dozen times, and as his head sank slowly under the swelling sea of thoughts.... *he remembered.*

A deep flash of white blinded him for just a moment, and then he was back in that graveyard, tied to the tombstone of Riddle's father.

A blink of an eye later and he was standing against Voldemort in the same graveyard, trying to keep his wand from shaking.

"*Crucio!*" hissed the newly resurrected Dark Lord.

"No..." Harry mumbled, as pain, his old friend, enveloped him in her cold grasp. "Not again!"

"Bow to death, Harry!"

*NOT AGAIN!*

*Blink.*

He was in the Department of Mysteries, struggling to drag Neville up the steps and defend himself at the same time. He saw the Order battling the Death Eaters, he saw Tonks fall, he saw Sirius duelling Bellatrix.

"I'm sorry, Harry," a faint voice to his left said.

Peeling his eyes away from the inevitability of Sirius's death, Harry turned back to Neville. He looked just as he had done on that day, just over a year ago... God it felt like several lifetimes.... his nose was broken, blood running down to his chin.

"You've nothing to be sorry for," Harry sighed, confused beyond reason. This was not what Neville had said that day. It was something different finally, after dozens of repetitions of these painful days.

"It will never be over, Harry, not for you...."

*Blink.*

Hordes of Death Eaters fell before Harry's lightning-encased arms, his power, his godforsaken power, killing hundreds of his enemies - showing no mercy, no quarter.... he was as bad as them.

"I'm Voldemort," he whispered, cutting a path through the swath of Death Eaters. "It's what I've had to do to survive...."

*Blink.*



Pain.

*Blink.*

Regret.

*Blink.*

Death... not his own, never his own.

*Blink.*

It will end, soon it will end.

He took two steps forward, and the fragile dark glass floor beneath his feet shattered into a splintery spider web of cracks, before giving way entirely and plunging his shadowy form into a stream of memories that hurt more than any physical injury ever could.

Harry struggled for breath against this body of his own memories, this ocean of painful experiences and confusion. He struggled to stay afloat, to stay alive, to not have to relive every moment all over again. It was futile, as it had been the last dozen times, and as his head sank slowly under the swelling sea of thoughts.... *he remembered.*

*Blink.*

"Watch as Hogwarts fall, Harry," the Dark Lord hissed, and then mercilessly thrust his own sword deep into Harry's shoulder.

Agony tore through the old wound, for it was old to him, and he shuddered as he was impaled upon that cold blade, too weak to remove it himself. Voldemort was speaking, but he didn't hear a word as the blade was thrust up and pulled roughly out of his flesh.

He screamed and fell backwards, blood staining the cool leaf-strewn forest floor.

*Blink.*

"Promise... promise me, Harry. Promise me you'll put that son of a bitch in the grave."

Harry put a hand on Ethan Rafe's dying chest, and nodded his promise. This wasn't exactly how it had happened, but his memories were so slurred that this was as close as it could get.

"I promise, Ethan," he said, wanting to die himself. "But I'm no better than him myself now.... you made this promise to a different Harry, one who still possessed a soul."

Ethan laughed and choked on his blood.

*Blink.*

Piercing cold forced Harry to his knees as hundreds of hooded creatures swirled and sucked his happiness from his mind, leaving nothing but his most painful memories.

Sirius was before him, dying as well, the Dementor's Kiss just moments away.

*"Expecto.... EXPECTO PATRONUM!"*

*Blink.*

Harry slumped against the platform he stood upon within his own mind, before the thin sheet of fragile black glass that always shattered when he put his full weight upon it. He had come to realise, as he stood in the darkness of his broken sanity, that this thin sheet of glass represented the strength of his mind... he couldn't cross it, he couldn't reach the other side.

*Harry....*

Whispers of thoughts and memories bit at him even here, above the pool of the darkest ones. He had been repeating this cycle for days, or it may have been years now, and he had yet to encounter a single happy memory. Perhaps that was just the way the universe worked.

Shivering, alone in this place, scared even, Harry couldn't stop the small tear that cut a rough track down his face and into the stubble upon his unshaven cheeks. When he realised it was there, he swatted it away angrily.

"I don't want to be here...." he muttered, rocking back and forth against the black wall he was fallen against. It was only a few feet wide, a pillar jutting out of his memories, and the bridge of glass was only a fraction of an inch thick. He knew he was stuck here, however hard he fought he could not escape himself.

"Do you think I want to be here?" a familiar, yet muffled voice rang out in the darkness.

Harry jumped, startled, he could not help it. "Who--?"

"Keep trying, Harry," the voice said, and Harry placed it. It sounded vaguely like Ethan Rafe... he remembered those final moments up atop Slytherin Fortress, when the Killing Curse had exploded and-- "You'll find a way."

"Where are you, Ethan?" he asked, peering around into the darkness that stretched forever around him. He could only really see a few feet in front of himself, and that wasn't good enough.

"*Lumos*," he whispered, holding his palms together. As before, no magical light jumped into his hands, he was magicless in this place - powerless.

"No, never powerless," Ethan said, his voice reverberating for miles in this barren darkness of memory. "You're not down for the count yet, Potter. Way too much is hanging on those bruised shoulders of yours for you to quit when it gets too tough."

Harry snarled. "I don't quit," he whispered. "I never have."

"Then stand up and be counted!" Ethan roared, and the walls of his mind shook.

He took two steps forward, and the fragile dark glass floor beneath his feet shattered into a splintery spider web of cracks, before giving way entirely and plunging his shadowy form into a stream of memories that hurt more than any physical injury ever could.

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?

A demonic man, the embodiment of Evil itself, stepped out of a hole in reality that hung in the air above the quiet, windswept plains on a world far removed from regular time and space.

Grass roots and barley shoots wilted and died as the demon walked slowly across the plain, glancing up with dead eyes at the star shot sky, admiring the double moons of this world. One pale green, reflecting the composition of some alien mineral in its surface, the other more recognisable as milky white.

It had been a monumental choice in the first few millennia during the construction of this world, back just after this universe exploded into existence, that had created two - instead of one - moons in the sky.

This world was also fairly distant from the troubles caused by Potter, by Voldemort, and the evil in their link that had created the demon that now held this world in his palm. As such, few effects of the destruction of the Boundary had been felt here, minor changes in weather the worst, and the population of this world was a few hundred thousand still, possibly a million or two.

It was a primitive world, having yet to discover electricity, to name one thing, and was ruled by religion and a monarchy. This country the demon walked upon was anyway - he didn't care much for the rest of the world. It was on these plains he would mount his defensive against Potter's inexplicable will to survive.

Not that Allarius was worried that Potter would succeed in stopping the destruction he had caused, that had birthed him. No, not in the least. This was just to seal the deal - here; on these massive empty plains that stretched for hundreds of empty miles.... here is where he will raise his army of Boundary demons and monsters.

Here, Potter will face his army alone - outnumbered.

Allarius smiled, black roses springing up from the earth behind him, it was truly amazing that the only hope the universes had was lying in a hospital bed in one of the lesser worlds, insanity tearing him away.

*The only hope...* he mused. Sometimes it was enough, Evil had been thwarted throughout all of the Ages of Time, across all worlds, by the smallest shining light. Even though it was stronger, sometimes it was defeated.... Allarius smiled again. He was worrying over nothing.

There was no help for Harry James Potter, he was insane and on his own. The Creator was millennia dead, eternity dead perhaps. Good, the Light, had no more heroes left to challenge the might of the Dark.

After a million eternities and countless battles in infinite stories the Final Days were here, and it would all come down to himself against an insane, *human* boy. The Creator was to be pitied for these choices.

The Creator, and Harry Potter.

\*~\*~\*~\*

*Blink.*

"We've lost, Harry," Ron spat, holding his intestines inside of him barely with one bloodied hand as he lay against the short wall that separated himself and Harry from the horde of Death Eaters and the Dark Lord.

Harry's eyes were glass, his heart pounding in his chest, he was shaking. "This isn't happening... this didn't happen," he whispered.

"It is happening," Ron sighed, colour draining fast from his cheeks, his red hair stuck to his head with equally red blood. "Hermione, Ginny, Neville... my family, everyone... they're dead, and I'm dying. Looks like you're the only one to survive again, mate. Can't say I envy you...."

Harry knelt down against the wall, frowning and crying - not aware of either - and tried uselessly to heal Ron's wound with his magic, except he didn't know how to heal... he could barely manage that patronus charm Remus had taught him in third year... that was the limit to his magic.

"This was just a nightmare I had," he told the dying Ron who felt so real, smelt so real, sounded... so real. It was reality indistinguishable from dreams... God it was real. "NO!"

*Blink.*

Not just memories of real events anymore, Harry had realised that hundreds of fallings through the shattered glass ago, but depictions of his darkest thoughts, his worst nightmares - brought to life with incredible accuracy and reality. It all felt real, right down to the clouds in the sky.

Ginny lay sprawled out before him, barely breathing and too pale. She lay in a pool of her own blood. Harry did nothing, even as the Death Eaters finished their work, his own arms held by air spells and muscled men. It wasn't real, and too painful to try.

*Blink.*

"How many times will we fight, Harry?" Voldemort asked. "How many times will we injure and nearly defeat one another? Until the world falls apart around us? Perhaps until all we want is ash? Answer me, boy. We've come too far for anything else...."

Harry held his wand in a grimy, blood covered hand. He was breathing hard, the heat of the air suffocating. They stood upon the ashy remains of Hogwarts castle, in a crater that had blasted away even the water of the lake - leaving nothing but a desert.

"I don't think either of us can ever truly die, Voldemort," Harry said, reliving this particular dream as a prisoner in his own body. He felt his lips moving, but couldn't control what they said - not this time. This was a dream, and he had no control.

"You may be right there, Potter, I fear you may be right."

Neither of them wanted to survive as the only living, immortal creature on a barren planet ravished by awesome power and *good* intentions.

*Blink.*

Harry was upon his knees looking through the thin transparent glass bridge that represented the strength of his mind. He looked through it to the swirling soup of thoughts and memories below, swirling and speckled with bright, but overrun, fractures of pure white light.

He blinked and fell back against the wall on the platform, the only structure beside the bridge that he could see within this place. Within his own mind. He sighed with fatigue, with frustration, it was never ending.

"I've tried everything..." he mumbled, staring through mismatched eyes at the thin sheet of glass that he had broken and fallen through hundreds of times - into his memories and nightmares. Each time stung like an open wound, and he feared he was damaging his mind even more.

He had tried everything - he had crawled, walked, run, jumped, hopped, skipped... Anything to get across that thin sheet of glass, but it was like trying to hold water in a sieve. It could not be done, not without some key he felt he had missed.

There had been nothing out of Ethan since that first time he had spoken to him, perhaps years ago now - it may have been seconds. He had long lost track of telling time, and he didn't think that mattered at all in this place anyway.

Not for the first time, and not for the last time, Harry wished he could be anyone else - and not have to constantly struggle against the workings of existence. It had long since driven him hard into the ground.

*But it had never broken him, and that counted for everything.*

Sighing again, he stared up pointlessly into the darkness above his head. He was looking for a way out, a solution to this problem. Anything!

"It's just mind over matter," he told himself, chuckling slightly. "Mind over mind over matter," he corrected. Without a moment's hesitation he jumped to his feet, and then took the bridge at a run.

He managed perhaps four feet out onto the glass before it shattered, and he was plunged into his memory once again. Harry did not fight sinking into the thick soup of thought; he knew this was one thing he could not beat.

\*~\*~\*~\*

*September*  
*13 days until the Autumnal Equinox*

9<sup>th</sup>

Lily Potter sighed and kicked off her high-heeled shoes before sinking back into the deep, fluffy armchair in her living quarters within the castle. She had just attended the memorial service for the children who had died in the battle, and for those who had died elsewhere.

Hogwarts was missing five hundred of its occupants, at least.

It had been a trying week or so since Harry had returned, a trying week to say the least. Outside of the boundary of white roses around the castle a wind so strong that even the biggest and strongest trees in the forest had been uprooted, had been blowing non stop for four days now.

The wind hit an invisible wall when it came to the castle wall though, but that wall didn't stop the debris from hurtling in at over three hundred miles per hour. There had been a few deaths and several injuries to the three thousand or so people still alive out on the grounds. It seemed everything was against them these days.

She just hoped that the wind died down soon, it really was causing havoc. Damage and injury from the debris, it was all they could do to stop it piling up and overrunning them.

And then there was Harry.

He hadn't improved in his condition at all. He lay unconscious night and day, muttering strained words that most of the time made little sense, and other times too much sense. It was terrifying, being alone with him on guard duty, and having to listen to some of the things he says... it isn't fair, on anyone, but mostly Harry.



\*~\*~\*~\*

*September*  
*12 days until the Autumnal Equinox*

10<sup>th</sup>

"D'you think Harry will want to stay, dad?" Michael Potter asked the next day.

James Potter couldn't help the frown that spread across his face, as he waited for the rest of his third years to file in and begin the day's lessons. "I think... Harry will do what he sees best, Michael. If that means he'll stay... well he's very welcome."

Michael nodded, understanding more than he let show. "I don't think he'll stay."

"What makes you say that?" asked James, placing a piece of parchment with the theory of today's lesson written upon it on every desk.

Michael shrugged, sitting on his desk and swinging his legs off to the side. "It would be exciting to travel to different universes. I reckon he'll want to do that."

James clicked his teeth. "I can't imagine doing that's easy, Michael. Not just the travelling part, but who he may meet in these other universes. It's hard for us to even imagine doing that, we can't do it, but Harry has. How would you feel if you met someone you knew to be dead?"

"Sad, I guess," Michael said.

James nodded. "Right. You don't want anything to do with things like that. I'm sorry that Harry does."

"How is he?" Michael then asked, swinging around the desk and down into his seat.

James hesitated before answering, just as the rest of his third years began to file into the room, some dragging their heels and others

noticing the empty desks, where there friends had sat less than a year ago alive.

"Better than he was," James lied. "He's better than he was."

\*~\*~\*~\*

Trembling slightly, his eyes closed in hope, Harry managed three steps onto the fragile glass bridge before the first of the spider web cracks began to shoot out from under his feet. He struggled not to move; he stopped breathing, and then raised his right foot to take another--

The weight on his left became too great, and the glass shattered in a spiralling fashion that he fell through, already sighing as he was submerged within his memories.

*Blink.*

"Choose wisely, Harry, because you are throwing away the power of a God."

*Blink.*

"It is our choices... that make us who we are."

*Blink.*

"You won't fail, Harry, you don't know how."

*Blink.*

"We will meet again--"

*Blink.*

"It will never--"

*Blink.*

"Once I--"

*Blink.*

"Love--"

Harry blinked, and he was back atop the pillar of cool black stone high above his pool of memories. Before him lay the glass bridge, millimetres thick and fragile to even the slightest touch. He hated the sight of it.

"I am sick and tired of these trips down memory fucking lane," he cursed, punching the dark wall behind him. He felt no pain, not here. There was no hunger or fatigue either, just constant, unchanging darkness.

He sighed, it was an age old sigh, and fell slumped against the wall he had just propelled his fist into. Beneath him the swirling memories swirled as they had done forever. He tried not to look at it.

"God..." he breathed. "I'm trapped in a nightmare within my own memories. It couldn't get any worse--"

Harry blinked, realised what he had just said, and a small, wry smile spread across his face. "No... I did not just say that."

Hours or days could have stretched by then, Harry did not know. All he had was darkness, and that was as silent as the grave. He stared at the bridge occasionally, wishing someone else had to deal with this, or had the answer to help him.

"Hermione," he said suddenly. "Hermione would know what to do... she's so smart. I wish--"

*Stop wishing - get up and do something about this*, he told himself stubbornly.

"But what?" he whispered. "There's nothing left to try."

To his right and left the ocean of memories sloshed against the walls of this stone pillar, behind him a wall rose up for an unimaginable, impassable height, and before him the bridge of thin glass stretched on into the darkness almost mockingly.

Harry sighed. "Why's it always darkness?" he mumbled, and then took the glass bridge at a run, pushing himself up with the back of his hands against the wall. It shattered on his first footfall, and he cursed on the way down.

*Blink.*

For one instant there was the sensation of falling through darkness, and then he was seated within an armchair beside the fire in the Gryffindor common room. Harry's memories were fuzzy, vague at best, and he had the worst headache. Bolts of aching pain shot through his forehead.

Gazing around through bloodshot, watering eyes, he could make out dark lumps and shadows seated and standing around him. He could smell roses, lavenders... flowers. He could smell a strong perfume.

"Is everything okay, Harry?" someone said to his left. He turned in that direction, but his eyes couldn't focus. They hurt, as did the rest of his head.

"|--"

"It may help if you put your glasses on, mate," Ron, *yes it was Ron*, said from somewhere to his left. Harry turned again and felt someone put something into his hands.

He fumbled with them for a moment, and then placed the glasses on his face. Everything became so much clearer, and his headache began to fail.

"I never needed the glasses in any other memory," he mumbled, and the gathering of his friends around him all frowned, some with concerned smiles.

"Did you fall asleep down here, Harry?" Hermione asked, nudging him over slightly and sitting down next to him. "We didn't take that long getting ready, you know. I know you boys think you only need five minutes to look presentable, but Ginny and I know better."

Harry coughed, more than a little uncomfortable with how close Hermione was. She was almost sitting on his knee. "What... what the bloody hell is going on?" he managed.

Hermione *tsked*, and slapped his shoulder playfully. "Mind your language, Harry Potter," she said, and then frowned. "It's not like you to swear," she continued, glancing at Ron with a roll of her eyes. "Are you sure you're okay?"

Harry laughed, certain he'd never had his memory before. "I'm as right as rain," he snorted, standing up. "And this isn't real."

He looked around the common room, glancing into every corner and at the only three people he could see. Ron, Hermione... and Ginny. There was Ginny, standing behind the chair he had been sitting in. She smiled shyly at him, concern flashing in her brown eyes. She looked stunning in a pair long flowing blue dress robes, her hair like a silk curtain hanging over her left shoulder.

Harry smiled wryly at her. "This is way too good to be real. I know I'm not this lucky, so what's going on?"

"Harry," Ron began, "you wanna sit down again? That may help."

Harry turned to him and winked, slapping him on the back hard. "Help what?" he asked, and took a few steps back, keeping all three of them in his line of sight.

"You're acting crazy, Harry," Hermione said, shaking her head and frowning. "Maybe we should take you to see Madam Fairtree--"

"Who's Madam Fairtree?" he asked, pacing up and down the space in front of the fire.

Ginny pursed her lips, and *tsked* herself this time. "You know she took Madam Pomfrey's job after she died when Voldemort attacked last ye--"

"Voldemort!" Harry exclaimed. "Let's have him join us, then it'll be a party."

"Sit down, Harry," Ron growled, taking Harry's shoulder in an iron grip. "You're not well."

Harry chuckled. "Don't I know it..." He pushed Ron away, none too gently, and then looked up towards the ceiling. "I'M DONE WITH THIS MEMORY," he roared.

*Blink.*

Harry coughed as he landed hard upon green grass. He turned onto his back and looked up at a blue, cloudless sky. The sun beat down hard upon him, and a warm wind was making him sweat.

"Well I don't think that should have worked," he whispered, staring into the infinite blue of the sky. This was a development, if nothing else, he had control over when a memory ended. Though that last one... he didn't remember ever living that, and had never heard the name Fairtree. It was odd, to say the least.

Out of habit, more than anything else, Harry tried to use magic. He thrust his hands forward and sought the power he knew lay only a thought away. It wasn't there; his arms fell uselessly back down onto the grass.

Pushing himself up with a groan, Harry sat up and gazed with squinting eyes at the bright countryside around him. As far as he could see, long plains of grass stretched for miles until they ended at the foot of mountains, which towered above it all in the distance. There was not a sign of another soul, and the only sounds were that of the wind, and the slow bubbling river a few hundred feet away. It meandered around a hillside about half a mile away and was lost from sight.

Harry rubbed his unshaven cheeks thoughtfully, resting his chin on his palm when he was done. He had definitely grown tired of all this crap. He felt so useless stuck here, within his own mind, with nothing but the memories of those who had died... of those he had killed.

His eyes darkened, even in the bright sunlight, as he thought of the blood on his hands. For a moment all he wanted to do was die, but that faded and was replaced by will. He would see this through to the

end, and answer for the life he had taken after that, if there was anything out there to judge him. He doubted it.

"Let's get this over with," he sighed, getting up on to his feet. "Okay... big empty green field with some mountains. I don't remember this but that doesn't seem to matter anymore. So...."

"Have you come here for forgiveness, Potter?"

Harry turned slowly, and met the eyes of the figure behind him levelly. "Ethan," he said. "Fancy seeing you here."

The teenager above Harry smiled, and walked down the hillside until they were level. "Ethan," Ethan said. "I suppose that's as good a name as any. Pull up a chair, Harry, let's chat."

Without hesitation, Ethan fell backwards as if to sit in a chair, and in the blink of an eye a chair appeared beneath him. He sat down with a smile, crossed his legs, and waited for Harry to do the same.

Clicking his teeth thoughtfully, Harry eyed the chair and Ethan with a little caution. "Don't laugh if I fall on my ass," he told Ethan, and then glanced over his shoulder, seeing nothing but grass waving in the wind. "There's a chair there," he told himself, and made as if to sit down on the air.

A moment later and Harry sat in a large, comfortable red armchair, similar to the ones in the common room. He was holding - of all things - a glass of ice cold lemonade in his right hand. He took a sip, not finding anything strange anymore, and glanced at Ethan questioningly.

Ethan smiled. "It's your mind, you can do what you want. Think of it as the Room of Requirement."

Harry nodded. "Well I wouldn't mind some chocolate," he said, and snorted laughter when a table with three tripodic legs appeared between himself and Ethan, holding an assortment of chocolate buttons - white, milk, and dark chocolate. He scooped up a handful, leaned back in his armchair, and gazed in relative relaxation at the countryside around him.

"You know," he said, looking back at Ethan, who sat calmly in his own chair staring at Harry as if they had all the time in the world, "if someone had told me a week ago that I'd be sitting in an armchair on a hill within my own mind, drinking lemonade and eating chocolate buttons, with the son of Voldemort for company...."

"You wouldn't have believed them," Ethan finished, turning his head slightly.

Harry smiled sadly, staring at the bowls of chocolate. "No... no, at this point in my life I probably would have believed them." His gaze hardened and he looked back up at Ethan. "What is this?"

"It's exactly what you said it was, Harry," Rafe said. "You're drinking lemonade and eating chocolate buttons upon a hillside within your own mind... with the son of Voldemort for company."

"You know what I meant," Harry growled, tossing away his chocolate buttons. "What are you?"

"Ethan Rafe," Ethan whispered. "A whole made from two halves... even less maybe."

"Start making sense or I'll *require* that chair of yours to burst into flame."

Ethan, or whatever he was, didn't flinch, if anything his smile deepened. It looked sincere, so did the scowl that replaced it with what he said next. "You recall those final moments atop of my father's fortress?" he asked. Hate, pure undiluted hate and fury disfigured Ethan's face now. Harry saw him clutching the arms of his chair, as if restraining himself from attacking. He was.

"I do," Harry nodded. "We were both on the receiving end of an exploding Killing Curse. Your curse, if memory serves."

The hate drained from Ethan's face, and it was replaced by thoughtfulness. He gazed at the chocolate buttons and saw through them. "I'm not sure if it does anymore," he muttered. "But anyway...."



"What do you think happened?" asked Harry, throwing away his empty glass of lemonade. "I felt... at the end there... I felt as if I was you. I saw through your eyes, knew your thoughts, and so on in that fashion."

Ethan laughed. "I don't know what happened exactly, and it has taken me days within your mind to gather enough of my shattered self together to talk to you here... but I think, and this is just a theory mind, that some... some part of me was... forced, perhaps, into you."

"I'm not sure I care for that," Harry frowned.

Ethan's eye bulged, and he glared at Harry with that hate again. "Do you think I enjoy being in this... this mind, Potter? I remember dying, I remember the pain... and what do I find when I get here, that I'm worse than dead, and that I'm different."

"Different?" Harry raised an eyebrow.

"I was... changed," Ethan sighed, fatigue replacing hate in his features. "Mixed... with your memories of myself... from another world. This is hard to explain."

"I'll bet," Harry nodded. "Is that why you're not trying to kill me?"

"Possibly," Ethan mumbled, sweat beading on his forehead. He required a glass of water, and it appeared in his hand. Harry wasn't too happy he could do that in his own mind. "I have memories now, of being your friend, of dying twice, of fighting... my father. I can't deny them, anymore than I can deny the years I spent in his service."

"Don't deny it."

Ethan went on as if he hadn't heard. "I became as you see me now, two halves of a whole. I feel pain, guilt, over what I did as myself, and what myself did as me. Your memories, your thoughts about me, Potter, have made me something I'm not - and I can't escape from that. I'm Ethan Rafe, a runaway from your own world... but I'm also the Dark Lord's son, and both halves of me hate one another."

Harry tapped his fingers on the arm of his plush chair. "I think..." he began slowly, "that this has to be placed up near the top of my 'Impossible but Happened' list."

"Nothing is impossible," Ethan mumbled, rubbing his forehead. "Do you have any idea what it feels like to have two voices in your head, tearing themselves apart?"

Harry laughed, he couldn't help it. "A voice in my head just asked me what its like to have a voice in my head. You're contradicting yourself there, Ethan--literally."

Ethan laughed, it sounded like a sob of pain and misery. "This is what happens to people who get too close to you, Harry," he said. "I was your enemy, what would you do to those you love?"

Harry scowled and opened his mouth to speak, but Ethan waved his reply away.

"I've seen what you do," he said. "I've waded through the tattered remnants of your memories almost as much as you have. How else do you think I became, in part, the Ethan you knew? No, I've seen many die for the love of you. Your mind is darker than mine ever could be."

Harry shrugged, sipping on a new glass of lemonade. "That's probably true, but at least I was fighting for the right cause."

"By becoming what you fought," Ethan replied, shouted even, and the ground shook. "This is getting us nowhere fast, Potter. We need a plan--"

"To do what?" Harry cut in, throwing up his hand in frustration. "I'm also trapped in here, in case you hadn't noticed. It seems I've been trying for years to get out, but that damn bridge shatters every time I try."

Ethan smiled, and this one looked dark. "There are other ways.... other exits."

"What are you talking about?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"Your mind needs time to repair itself, Harry. That is why the bridge shatters every time you step on it. It is not ready to face reality yet, not with what you have to do."

Harry's face became emotionless. "And what do I have to do?"

Ethan smiled. "You've got to save the godforsaken universe, and soon."

Harry sighed. "You've been in those memories as well then. Well... what do you want for showing me one of these other exits?"

A slow, deceptive grin spread across Ethan's face, and he leaned forward in his chair. "Harry, what makes you think I want--"

"Everybody wants something."

Ethan blinked. "Very well. I'll help you get out of here, back into yourself, as it were, so you can do the hero thing. But after that... if you're still alive, I want your help in getting out of your head. I don't want to be here, I don't want to exist... being of two minds is... just too painful."

"That's agreed," Harry replied, without a moment's hesitation. "I don't want you in here either." He reached across the table, and offered Ethan his scarred and calloused right hand.

After a moment of indecision, Ethan took it, and the two of them gripped each other hard enough to break fingers in reality. Here they felt nothing. "Let's go then," Ethan smiled, and the green countryside disappeared in a storm of fire and ash.

Harry held Ethan's hand strongly, as the world around him spun faster and faster, much like a Portkey, and red flames spiralled around the two of them - encasing the two teenager's in an egg of flame. The force upon Harry, the force of gravity, became so strong that he couldn't keep his eyes open.

Wind howled in his ears, and he began to scream. He could hear Ethan doing the same.

\*~\*~\*~\*

*September*

15<sup>th</sup>

*7 days until the Autumnal Equinox*

The fabric of reality bent unnaturally upon the Hogwarts grounds, and a sound like wood straining was heard moments before a long, jagged tear was rent in the air beside the shore of the lake.

Not one of the three thousand residents of Hogwarts noticed the tear in the air, and not a one noticed the tall, all too human-looking man that stepped out onto the sandy ground by the lake.

Allarius smiled, he couldn't help it, as he beheld this version of Hogwarts castle. He could sense Harry up there, within its halls and maze like corridors, and knew he had no need to worry about the coming battle. Harry would be in a coma for months yet, and that might be enough time for the damage to become irreversible.

His smile tightened into something malevolent as he saw the row of large, magically expanded homes lining the castle grounds. The first lay a few hundred yards away, almost against the lake bank. It had a small pier built alongside it; sloshing lake water rang in his ears.

Almost subconsciously, his arms came together and a blaze of fire and ice, two halves of one force, ran up his arms in a power different from humans, but stronger than most. He sometimes wondered if it equalled Potter's, and felt certain that it not only equalled, but at times exceeded.

Fire and ice, spiral weaves worked their way up his human arms, encasing them even. Allarius blinked, smiled, and pointed his little finger towards the nearest house, which, at this time of the morning, was home to two hundred and fifty people. A thin beam of white light, cruel white light, shot forth from his finger.

The house simply ceased to exist, simply ceased to be. Allarius was laughing as the wave of intense heat rushed through him. The house next to that one met the same fate, but he began to get more creative after that... mostly so he could just watch it all burn.

The screams were what he was waiting for, and he was not disappointed. Potter was his enemy, the only true enemy worth a damn out of all of existence, and when he woke he would wake to a castle slaughtered. He would wake to a massacre of those who trusted him, who may have even loved him.

Allarius felt pure joy. All his plans were falling into place, months of planning and it all would end soon. It was glorious, as glorious as the screams of the innocent. They were certain, even if nothing else could be.

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"How come you have more control in my mind than I do?" Harry asked, stepping over parched and sun dried ground. He felt certain he was still within his own head, but the space here was huge, monumental, it could have been a whole world in a drop of water.

Ethan shrugged. "I'm not sure. Just another theory, but I think it's because I'm an outside influence. The rules don't apply to me, as your mind doesn't know I'm here - because I shouldn't be. Confusing as all hell, but its all we've got to go on. Shall we continue?"

Harry nodded. It had been the same for what felt like hours now. They walked... and walked... and walked... and walked. At one point they had run, as a beast so huge, so powerful, had leapt at them out of the shadows. Having not a drop of magic at their disposal, the two boys had run, and fallen into this plain within Harry's mind. A desert, a torn mind representation.

It was food for thought.

"Where are you taking me?" Harry asked, not for the first time. "Where is the... the exit?"

Ethan glanced at him and for a moment Harry saw the Ethan that wasn't his friend, that would do anything to see him die. It was replaced by the neutral medium in between, and the scowl became a frown.

"Ahead," he replied exasperated. "I don't know much more than you do about this," he continued, somewhat angrily. "I mean what the hell was that thing with tusks and seven legs? You don't have enough after you, Potter! You have to start creating monsters of your own."

Harry smiled. "I didn't make that up. If you go swimming in my more recent memories, you might find a fight at a fuel station against Allarius' demons. They're real."

Ethan sighed. "Hell of a mistake to allow something like that exist. You ever wonder who the hell oversees existence?"

Harry clicked his teeth. "You'd be surprised how often I do," he said, wiping his forehead of the sweat. It was hot in this desert, this unchanging sand covered desert. "And I think that no one does, or if someone ever did they've long since given up hope. Fallen asleep on the job, perhaps... you?"

Ethan laughed mirthlessly. "God..." he said, almost spat. "If He does exist I think I was right to throw in my lot with my father. As far as I can tell Heaven and Hell aren't much different, and being evil is a hell of a lot more fun than following the rules."

Harry fell back a few steps behind Ethan, observed his slick brown hair and shape from behind. "You don't mean that," he said. "Or was that Evil Ethan talking? The one I knew would... did die before serving Voldemort."

Ethan did spit this time, onto the parched ground. "I don't know which one I am, and I don't want to find out. Remember our agreement, Potter... as soon as you're finished with this demon of yours, you get me out of your head."

"Gladly...." Harry mumbled, and they moved on.

Perhaps because Harry expected it to, the further they walked the lower the sun sank on the horizon. He began to feel... more alive, perhaps, the longer they moved and he decided it was because he was becoming more conscious - it had to be. They were bypassing, for use of a better word, the safety procedures in his mind that kept him unconscious while his mind healed itself.

He knew he wasn't doing himself any good by taking the quick way out, in fact it was probably very damaging - but time was against him. For all his power that was one aspect of existence he hadn't tried to control, and doubted that he could. Time is relative, time is infinite... it doesn't matter and yet it is all that exists... again, perhaps.

He pictured this desert really, as himself slowly crawling along his physical mind, towards whatever part of it was responsible for waking him up. Once he got there, he was out - he had jumped over the glass bridge and walked out, taken another road. Harry hoped Ethan knew where he was going. He seemed to, and Harry supposed he really was above the rules of his mind.

*He's trapped in here though,* Harry thought, glancing around at the unchanging desert of his mind. A small wry smile spread across his face as he did, *Ethan can't possibly do any more damage than I've already done.*

"I think we're getting close," Harry said suddenly. "I feel--"

The ground beneath their feet cracked and exploded. Torrents of flame tore from the ground and exploded three hundred feet above their heads. A breeze of searing hot air buffeted both Harry and Ethan, who jumped and linked hands just as this burning world disintegrated around them.

The world swirled again, much like a Portkey, again, and they both grunted as they landed hard on cold, wet concrete. Harry moaned, rolled over, and saw his breath on the air. He looked up at a street light with dazed eyes, and to his left saw Ethan doing the same.

"Oh man, I never get tired of that," Ethan moaned, showing more of the Ethan Harry had called friend, than the one he had destroyed. "Never a dull day around you, Potter."

Harry laughed harshly, and struggled to stand up. His back was damp from the cold wet ground, and he ached all over. "Can't argue with that."

It took longer than he thought it would, and Ethan was in no better shape. Two minutes, with leaning against a nearby brick wall for help,

and they both stood upon their own feet - sweating in the cool night air, and breathing heavily.

"This place... feels heavier," Harry commented. "Like the air's pressing down on me... do you feel it?"

Ethan shook his head. "Must be something to do with yourself, or something?"

Harry sighed. "Let's just get this over with...."

They stood upon a street that looked much like any Muggle street in the country. A row of houses stretched along either side of the road, and at thirty foot intervals street lamps stretched high above the ground. There were a few simple cars parked here and there, and darkness beyond both ends of the street.

"Reminds me of Privet Drive," Harry mumbled, and attempted to require a jumper or cloak to cover his shirt with. It was cold, but it seemed he couldn't control things here as he had done on that hillside with Ethan. He shivered, and looked to Ethan, wondering what to do next.

"What do we do next?" Ethan asked, mumbling under his breath.

Harry raised his eyebrows in surprise. "You're asking me!?" he exclaimed.

Ethan scowled and turned away, looking down the street. "This way's as good as any. Come on, Potter."

Harry bit back a sarcastic retort, and congratulated himself on doing so. "What are we looking for?" he asked, once they had been walking for about a minute.

"An exit," Ethan replied, his own breath not showing on the air. He really shouldn't have been here, none of it applied to him.

"And what do these exits look like?"



Ethan spat upon the ground, and turned towards Harry with his fists clenched. Harry had to remind himself that there were two personalities in the boy before him, and that one of them would do anything to see him dead.

After a tense moment, Ethan growled, "We'll know when we find one...."

Harry remained silent after that, as much to keep the peace than anything else. They walked down this Muggle street, which seemed to grow ahead of them and shrink behind them, always remaining the same length but changing its scenery. Soon they encountered a large park that resembled the one in Surrey right down to the broken swings that Harry had all but forgotten about.

Wild, white roses covered the expanse of the park, and wound their way up around trees and the metal play equipment. Ethan glanced at them once and moved on, but Harry marvelled that all of this existed within his mind. It was like a whole universe within his head, and that thought scared him.

The weight bearing down upon him seemed to increase with every step now. It felt as if he were carrying a heavy weight around his neck, and dragging four more weights along chained around his ankles and wrists. He grit his teeth and persevered though, not willing to show any weakness to Ethan.

At one point, just as they passed a row of clean suburban houses, Harry asked, "Do you have any idea how much time has passed since... since--"

"Since you killed me?" Ethan finished, looking at Harry out of the corner of his eye. "Not a clue... in here time doesn't matter. Out in the world it could have been years... weeks... days... minutes, possibly seconds. What does it matter?"

"The Equinox," Harry mumbled. "Everything hangs on that."

"Let's pick up the pace then," Ethan replied, and they did. Harry found it hard with the increasing weight, but his will was strong and he kept up with Rafe.

The road they were on ended suddenly, and before them loomed a high warehouse, dark around the outside with pale lights shining through the high windows overhead. There were three big loading dock doors, with stationary trucks lined up next to them silently. The logo on the side of the truck was a lightning bolt, and written beneath it in bright red letters were the words,

**Memory**

**Inc.**

***You live 'em, we ship 'em***

"Your mind has got to be the most buggered up place anywhere, Potter," Ethan said, setting off towards the warehouse across wet black tarmac. "By the way, what's that nonsense about you wanting to travel through time...? I read that thought somewhere."

Harry hesitated just a moment before answering. "Seems there's nothing you don't know about," he mumbled. "I'm going to travel back to the day I left, and stop all this from ever happening."

"All of what?"

Harry sighed. "All of everything... the destruction of the Boundary, the pollution in the Stream, Allarius, all the death across the worlds, you...."

Ethan nodded. "You think if you manage this, I won't be in your head?"

"That I don't know... one thing with time travel is I'll remember everything that happened, and you're a part of that now... I think you may continue to exist here."

Ethan couldn't help the frown that covered his face. "I don't think your plan will work... too many things could go wrong. You don't even know how to travel through time!"

They were walking passed one of those strange trucks now, the night still uninhabited and silent, towards a set of glass doors that would lead into the large, metallic grey building.

"And you do?" Harry spat, glancing at Ethan. He held back another insult and said, "We'll see how it plays out. It's not game over yet."

Ethan was silent for a moment as they reached the doors, his hand reaching out for the slender handle on the nearest one. "The cost of your... game... is high, Harry."

Harry didn't have a reply for that.

The inside of this warehouse was bare, barren, and felt wrong, to Harry. There was nothing but a wide open space, with a few metal girders and support beams holding up the roof and rusting themselves away. Bare walls and a dust covered floor completed the image of emptiness, although there were white square shaped imprints in the floor, where crates or boxes had been stacked... not anymore though. What did that mean?

"Nothing on your mind, Potter?" Ethan asked, his lips quirking slightly into a smile.

Harry let that one slide, and glanced around at the empty warehouse again. It felt disheartening, to say the least. There was nothing, nothing except a faintly glowing green--

"It can't be that simple," Harry breathed, looking straight across the empty building to a rectangular shaped glowing box above a door on the back wall. The halogen light was green with four white letters emphasized in white light. The sign said,

## **EXIT**

Ethan was chuckling. "From what I've seen of your mind that has *got* to be it."

Harry was beginning to struggle with this immense weight pressing down upon him. It grew with every step he took towards the door along the back wall, and it began to feel sharper, like claws digging into him, dragging him away from consciousness. He supposed it was his mind protecting himself, trying to prevent him from waking up in his broken state.

"I'll just have to live with whatever I am once I wake up," he muttered, sighing under the increasing weight. "I just hope I'm not a gibbering idiot."

It was a battle of will just to keep his eyes open when they reached the dusty, rusted door. There was a padlock looped through the latch on the door. Harry steadied himself against the wall, slumping with one hand grasping at the metal support. He looked at Ethan.

"You got a key?" Ethan asked.

Harry shook his head, panting. He felt as if someone was hitting a gong inside his head. The fact that his head felt this way while he was, in fact, inside his head seemed just a contradiction of logic. He didn't bother thinking about it, couldn't even if he had wanted to.

There was a steel bar leaning against the wall near the door, spotted with rings of rust. It scraped across the floor as Ethan picked it up, holding the base and dropping the tip into the groove between his neck and shoulder.

"Stand back, hero," he said, and Harry jumped back as Ethan took the door on the swing.

The echo of metal on metal rang out through the large dusty warehouse. The padlock remained, but the latch on the door was bent out of shape. A few good whacks would see it off.

Harry sweated, struggling to breathe. "I'm not sure if it's a good thing that you're breaking a door in my mind, Ethan," he managed, and Ethan just stared at him. Waiting, it seemed, for his approval to continue. Harry sighed and waved him on. "Try not to do too much damage."

Harry winced at every blow until the latch, complete with locked padlock, fell to the dusty stone beneath his feet, clattering once or twice before coming to a stop. Ethan was panting as well now, even as he let the metal bar fall to the floor. There was a moment when hate-filled eyes glared at Harry, and his grip on the bar tightened, but thankfully it passed when he dropped it.

Ethan pushed the door and it swung outwards on its hinges, fast and hard, but not making a sound. A bright white light shone in through the doorframe and defeated some of the darkness around the floor at their feet.

"What do you reckon?" Harry asked, glancing at the white light. That was all that could be seen, nothing more. Just a rectangle of white light in the air.

"It still says exit above our heads." Ethan bit his bottom lip and stepped forward towards the light. His hand came into contact with it first, and in the blink of an eye he was repelled and thrown backwards in a spiral. He turned fast and took a run at the door, this time ending up on the ground.

Despite the weight pressing down upon him, Harry offered Ethan his hand for the second time that day... or year... and helped him to his feet. "Not an exit for me then," Rafe whispered, looking expectantly towards Harry.

Harry turned back towards the door, gazing with glazed over eyes at the white frame and arc of light stretching out from the wall. He steeled himself, made ready to jump, and was just about to when he felt a hard grip on his arm. He looked over his shoulder at Ethan.

"You swear you'll get me out of your head, Potter?" he asked. "You swear it?"

Harry blinked. "I said I would, didn't I?"

Ethan's eyes hardened. "Swear it on Ginny's life, swear you'll do all you can to get me out of here."

Harry gasped, he couldn't help it, but Ethan looked ready to kill, if he could in this place. "I swear it," he finally managed. It was a shock that he knew about Ginny, even though he must have been in those memories as well. Harry wondered how much time really had past since his falling unconscious. "I swear it, Ethan."

Ethan relaxed his grip, and took two steps back from the door. "I don't know if I'll be able to talk to you after this, but I will hold you to that promise, even to the grave. You understand?"

Harry nodded, and then didn't waste another moment in stepping through the bubble of white pure light. He felt cold, and then free, and then pain.

\*~\*~\*~\*

*The*  
*0200*  
*September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1997*

*Autumnal*

*Equinox*  
*hours*

When Harry opened his eyes, it felt as if someone was thrusting sharp, razor sharp, barbs into them. He groaned, rolled over on the bed, and winced in pain and surprise as all his joints cracked and stretched. Groaning again, he moved his tired muscles and bore the pain silently

His vision was blurry, but he could see he was in the infirmary at Hogwarts, and that the only light was shining in through the high windows - it was the pale light of the moon. His first thought was, that the castle felt empty... cold.

He coughed, his throat was dry and his stomach grumbled. With all the effort inside of him, Harry pulled himself up into a sitting position, and leaned back against the headboard of the bed. His vision was starting to adjust when the smell hit him hard.

Harry retched, dry retched over the side of his bed when that all too familiar stench of decay, of stale air and death penetrated his nostrils. *There are dead here*, was all he thought, breathing slowly through his mouth.

He attempted to stand, but didn't have the energy.

It was too quiet.

Looking to his left, Harry spotted his basilisk armour leaning against the leg of the bedside table, and his shrunken trunk sitting upon the

same table. With some effort, he managed to swing his legs around off the side of the bed, and reach for that trunk.

The smell stung his eyes, and he glanced around again at the dark, silent hospital. Wind blew against the windows, and a few shadows crossed the moon, but nothing more. It didn't scare Harry, only put him on edge.

His hands were shaking though, from hunger and thirst, from fatigue and pain. He picked up the small trunk, trying to hold his hands steady, and placed it on the ground in front of him. Thinking the magic, there was a flash of golden light and the trunk expanded to its regular size. Harry kicked open the lid.

Inside were all manner of useful and lifesaving implements. Before anything else, Harry removed three vials of certain potions from the rack attached to the back wall of the expanded trunk. He fumbled with the corks for a moment, and then downed the first purple coloured concoction.

Strength flowed into his veins and he tossed the vial aside, making way for the next one. The edge on his hunger was blunted as he swallowed the green potion, but his throat was still painfully dry. The third potion calmed him, and helped build his strength - a nutrition supplement.

Still shaking, Harry managed to stand and reach into his trunk to pull out his final pair of jeans, black, and his only white polo shirt, a bit large and baggy but it would cover the basilisk armour well.

Trying not to breathe too deeply, Harry stripped out of his blue and white striped hospital pyjamas, and slipped on the jeans and shirt, but not before the basilisk armour. He shivered in doing so, it was cold. When he was done and the potions had had a greater chance to work, he reached back into the trunk and attached his wand in its holster to the inside of his right arm.

At the bottom of the trunk was a cache of weaponry. Harry took in the swords and daggers, the pistols and rifles, and sighed. He reached out for the sword of Gryffindor within his right arm and felt it there. It truly was one of the most powerful weapons he held. Deciding to

strap on a pistol in a holster to the strap of his jeans, Harry closed the trunk and shrunk it back down, slipping it easily into his pocket when he was done.

He sat on the bed for a moment with his head in his hands. He was ready to go, but dreaded what he knew was beyond the hospital doors. Dead... possibly hundreds of dead, if the smell was anything to go by.

*Get a move on*, a voice in his head said, and Harry couldn't be sure if it was his own or Ethan's.

He didn't answer it, at any rate, but did stand up, swaying slightly but keeping to his feet. The footfalls of his boots were loud and ominous upon the stone of the dark infirmary floor, and Harry found himself walking dizzily towards the doors. The old oak doors creaked as he opened them, and a sliver of moonlight broke through onto the corridor outside.

The air was staler out here in the corridors, more bitter. He could taste it in the back of his throat, like a powdery spice. He waved his hand and purified the air around him, not aware that he was muttering under his breath.

"Dead... dead.... they're dead."

Harry came, in time, to the heart of the castle and looked up and down at the dozens of moving and changing staircases. For once, they were all silent... as for the thousands of portraits on the wall; every last one of them had been slashed, destroyed. It was all quiet at Hogwarts.

Upon the floor though at the top of the stairs where Harry stood, in a red that was eerily reminiscent of blood, was written this,

*This way, Potter.*

An arrow in the same blood pointed down the stairs. Without even thinking about it, as the blood was long dry, he took off down the stairs.



"It will never be over...." he mumbled, his head throbbing. He touched his forehead and it felt as if it were on fire. He was running a fever.

He followed now a long thick line of dry red blood, taking care not to step on it for some reason. It led him down several sets of stairs and down three or four corridors and through two rooms and one secret passage.

The stink of the dead intensified the closer he drew to the Entrance Hall, and a ball of cold ice seemed to have settled itself in his stomach. His eyes flashed dangerously into every shadowed corner, behind suits of blood stained armour and slashed paintings, into the hollows in the wall and even to the ceiling. He didn't know what to expect, but his eyes were wild.

At one point, Harry paused to lean against the wall and catch his breath as well as he could in this air, casting a purifying charm around the area to help. His mind jumped back and forth between what had happened at Slytherin Fortress, to Ethan in his head, and to everything else back from those two events. He needed to know what day it was....

Swallowing his pain and fatigue, Harry steeled himself with thoughts of going home soon, and carried on. The hallways and corridors passed by in a blur over the next five minutes, but the line of dark red blood remained constant, and cut a path straight for the Entrance Hall.

Harry stumbled along with his shirt held up over his nose, and his eyes squinted. Around the next corner he could see the glowing flickering light of fire, and knew he wasn't about to like what he found in the Entrance Hall. Without hesitating though, he was made of stronger stuff than that, he walked around the corner and beheld the massacre.

His shaking legs gave out beneath him at the top of the stairs above the Great Hall, and a cry of anguish escaped his lips, tears springing from his mismatched and tired eyes. Everyone was dead.

"No..." he breathed, thinking back again through the months he had spent here, the lives he had shaped and ruined, the ends he had wrought through power and blood.

*You play God and this is what you get*, Ethan said, but Harry couldn't, or perhaps wouldn't, hear him. His eyes were glued to the scene before him.

The entire floor, stone and inlaid carpet, was coated crimson from the castle doors to the Great Hall and to the base of the stairs. Handprints in long, desperate claw marks along the walls were made of blood as well... whoever did this wasn't done though, and Harry had a good idea who *had* done this.

Seated.... yes, *seated*... in bloody chairs around a glowing beam of light in the centre of the room, were people Harry knew well, had known well. Their faces were blank; their bodies in different stages of decomposition, but their glazed eyes were unmistakable to Harry.

Lily and James Potter were closest, hand in hand. Their faces were blank but something or someone had drawn red smiles on them with blood. Harry dry retched some more as his eyes flickered to them all.

Michael and Melissa.... Sirius and Remus... Sophia, Derris, Grace Arnair, Art Nuan. Everyone he was close to in this world. Next, seated nearer to the beam of white light in the centre of the room, bathed in red from the blood, was Glen Thomas. Again, no sign of pain or discomfort upon his face, just blood.

Finally, and this solidified Harry's belief that Allarius was responsible for this madness, Albus Dumbledore sat, not smiling and holding his wand in one hand and a black rose in the pale, ancient other.

Pain and agony upon Harry's face was replaced by madness, a dangerous glint in his eye, and a gritting of his teeth. The ground beneath him cracked as a wave of uncontrolled power emanated from deep within him, breaking the stone banister and shattering windows behind him.

Clenching his fists, he pulled himself to his feet no longer seeing the dead. Anger, untamed and wild surged through him and manifested itself in at least a dozen different forms. His eyes glowed, the air became super heated, his hair moved and there was no wind. The carpet beneath his feet burst into flame and was reduced to ash.

The glowing beam of light, about three feet across, in the middle of the Entrance Hall caught his attention now, as did the square object floating within it. Sweating pure power, Harry no longer felt any fatigue, he felt more alive than he ever had done. He walked slowly, calmly, down the stairs, ignoring the dead, and over to the beam of white light.

A circle had been drawn into the floor before him, and it was from the radius of this that the light grew, suspending an envelope of parchment just at shoulder height before him. Harry reached into the light, broke the beam, and removed the thin sheet of folded parchment.

The light still shone even after the parchment was removed, but Harry paid it no mind as he broke the seal on the edge of the letter and flipped it open. His eyes narrowed at every word he read.

*Dear Potter,*

*If there's still a world left for you to find and read this, I offer my congratulations. It seems we can't keep you down for long, no matter what we try. That said, the Killing Curse exploding drama was all your own doing, but we think you get the point.*

*Look around, boy. You see that? That's what you do to the people who are close to you, what you will always do to people who get close to you. That is your family, your friends, your guilt staring at you from those bloody chairs. Hurts, don't it.*

*Seeing as how we are so short of time these days, I'll be quick from now on. You've lost, Harry. All the power of all the worlds could not help you now. Existence has grown so thin that I was able to punch a hole through to this world with no more than a wave of my hand. You have lost.*

*There is nothing you can do now but sit back and enjoy the chaos. It is coming, and there is nothing you or any of your allies can do to stop it.*

Harry stopped there, his eyes widening in shock for just a moment. Shock and confusion. He realised he'd been crunching the letter hard

in his fist, and loosened his grip slightly. *Allies?* he thought, *what allies?* He read on,

*We are alike, you and I, Harry - more so than many realise. We deal in power, and universes, and men tremble when they hear our footsteps. Nothing can stop us, except each other. Tell me, Harry, how will it end?*

*It won't for you. For you, it will never be over.*

*Before you there is a beam of white light. This is a Portkey, of sorts, made by a much deeper and stronger magic than that used by the foolish mortals beneath us. You know of the power I write of. Step into the beam and I'll meet you before destiny. Step into the beam, and we will shake the foundations of Creation.*

*In anticipation, Harry James Potter,*

*Allarius.*

Next to that name was a blood red kiss, as if Allarius had kissed the paper with blood on his lips. Harry was certain the demon had. With a cry, the letter exploded in a fountain of purple sparks, incinerating the parchment to nothing more than dust.

Again, without hesitating, Harry stepped into the beam of light before him. He felt nothing at first, but then the world began to fade. He cast a final, heart breaking look of pure guilt at those dead faces seated around him, and couldn't help the single tear that always seemed to escape at moments like this.

"I'm sorry...." he whispered. "I'll set it right, James... Lily. I'll-- I'm sorry...."

White beads of light dripped down before his eyes, and Harry blinked. The world melted and then there was blackness. It took a moment, and Harry felt himself being thrown over a vast distance before an image of anything but darkness began to solidify before his eyes.

He blinked again. As pale light faded around him he stood upon a high cliff above a choppy dark ocean. Blue skies stretched forever

and over the horizon above his head, and the ground beneath his feet was sandy rock. He stood on the precipice, on the edge of the cliff at the bottom of which, five hundred feet away, the ocean blasted against the rock in a spray of cool white froth.

He didn't quiver, even though the tips of his boots hung over the edge of this extremely steep mass of rock. He rocked back and forth defiantly on his heels for a moment, until a gust of warm wind nearly sent him over. Shaking his head and not realising he was muttering and smiling insanely, Harry turned away from the cliff and looked out at the land behind him.

He couldn't see very far, nothing beyond the elevated ground a few hundred feet away. There was no sign of civilisation, nothing beyond dried, parched grass and a few unfamiliar types of flora and fauna. Unfamiliar except for one. On a small hill to his left, chewing at the ground and scratching itself behind the ear with one of its long paws, was an animal Harry recognised.

It saw him as well, and didn't hesitate in bounding away. With another of those unknowing smiles Harry watched the kangaroo jump away and disappear from sight.

"Australia..." he mumbled. "It has to be Australia."

He looked up to see how high the sun was in the sky. It wasn't quite overhead yet and it was more to the east. He put the time at about ten, eleven o'clock in the morning.

"But what is the date?" he whispered.

*That doesn't matter, he heard Ethan mumble, from across a great distance. Allarius can come through, you can leave. The equinox is broken.*

Harry was startled for a moment, uncertain. He wasn't sure about Ethan, he wasn't sure that his own mind hadn't made him up, as a guide for what he needed and wanted. It was a possibility, but he could really be in there. Harry honestly did not know...

*Are you really there?* he wondered. There was no response.

It did not matter now anyway. Six months or so had passed in a blur of battles and hospital beds, of war and death. He had come to this world a stranger, barely alive, and now he was the only one who would be leaving it alive. He was the only human being on this entire *world*. The thought made him want to throw himself off the cliff, and at the same time breakdown and weep.

Perhaps both amounted to the same thing - weakness, failure. Harry saw it that way.

So many dead... he would wade through the blood of his friends and enemies alike, and still stand at the end. Still stand, against whatever the universe had left to throw at him.

Harry spat on the parched and dry dusty rock beneath his feet, and called for the sword of Gryffindor at the same time. He held it in his right hand and looked down to his left palm.

There was a long, healed scar stretching from the base of his index finger down to his wrist. His promise, his blood promise that he would see Voldemort in the grave, no matter how high the cost. Grinding his teeth, he made another cut diagonally across that scar, from the base of his little finger to the base of his thumb.

It wasn't deep, it didn't hurt, and it only bled a little. It was necessary for what was to come, he knew, thinking back to the hazy moments on March 20<sup>th</sup>, when Voldemort had opened a door....

This second cut, that would scar, also became a promise. A promise to not let anyone stand against him again, or stand in his way, to not run, to fix the damage he had done. It was a promise that he would redeem himself, if such a thing were possible now. He had come so far through so many battles he could no longer remember the first.

The sword disappeared with a thought, and Harry clenched his bloody hand into a fist. "Time to make a move...." he said without thought, imagining a chessboard in his mind.

With a flick of the wrist his wand shot up into his hand, replacing the sword, and Harry licked his lips. He had tried this spell three times over the last six months, and each time it had thrown him clean off his

feet and back for several dozen feet. He turned back to the cliff edge, the ocean, and pointed his wand in that direction.

No more waiting, no more tempting fate. Harry bellowed, "*TEMPUS AC CAPACITAS!*"

White light, deep creamy white light flowed out of his wand gently, almost lazily. It streamed through the air ahead of him, out over the face of the cliff and the choppy ocean waters hundreds of feet below. Harry didn't blink as the light intensified. He brought his blood covered left hand up, and placed it in the beam of white light on the tip of his wand.

The air behind him was bending, but he didn't notice. Harry's beam of cream light flickered for a moment, and then a stream of blood ran its length, turning the tip of the beam forty feet away into a sphere of crimson red, hanging in the air above the sea. He smiled and laughed, unaware on any conscious level he was doing either.

Wind rocked around him and deafened his ears. He didn't hear the sucking sound of the air and space behind him as a long, jagged scar opened in reality. It was a doorway, of course, we've seen them before. A darkness, thin tendrils of pure darkness reached out of this doorway towards the Boy Who Lived, but withdrew when a man shaped demon stepped out of the doorway, and onto the dusty ground. Harry made no sign that he had seen a thing.

Allarius smiled when he saw Potter, again he could not help it. The boy never said die, he could admire that, even if he would be the one to destroy the life within that seething mass of wild power. The gap behind him closed with a snap, and the sphere of red magic ahead of Potter increased in size, threatening to burst at any moment.

It was a crude way to open a gate into the Boundary, Allarius frowned. Potter may have talent, he may have power, but he didn't know how to use it. He could open the gate with a simple wave of his hand, and the proper application of strength if he merely thought about it. That was a clear weakness... Yet he did have an abundant will to survive, he would take no chances.

Allarius weaved a shield of raw power around his human self, tying it into the very air - unbreakable. He approached Harry from behind, the boy's attention solely on the growing and spinning sphere of crimson magic before him.

A long, black dagger hung from Allarius' belt, and the demon drew it with a smile and a glint in his eye. He flipped it expertly up and down in his hand, flipping it over his knuckles and never touching the blade. He smiled, aimed at Harry's neck, and threw it with a deadly accuracy.

Harry spun so fast the demon blinked before he realised the boy had moved. The dagger came to a quivering halt an inch from his throat and sang as if it had hit a brick wall, suspended in the air as it was now before the boy.

"You were about as subtle as a train wreck," Harry smiled, and with a thought flung the dagger back. He didn't raise an eye as the black hilt was imbedded deep in Allarius' shoulder, shattering his unbreakable shield in the process.

Allarius snarled in disbelief and cried out in unknown pain as his own poisoned dagger cut into his true demon flesh. That the boy had known and been so fast was unbelievable, he had grown in power even since the fortress incident and--

"That one was for Michael," Potter said calmly, as if discussing the matter over drinks... *and chocolate buttons*.

"You will die," Allarius snarled. "There is no place in all of existence that you can hide, no place in all of time." He ripped his own dagger from his flesh, and thrust it deep into the ground with his own magic. His skin began to knit itself back together almost immediately.

Harry didn't blink, didn't flinch. "There will be one more for everyone you hurt, for all the innocent who died for your ambition. Mark me well, demon, I am Harry Potter, and you will fear me."

Harry watched this exchange between himself and the demon as if he were an outside observer. He barely realised what he had said until it was said, and then did not regret a single word. Perhaps he had just



put the fear of god into Allarius, perhaps not - he had scored a point at least.

Allarius screamed in pure fury. His arms glowed and his eyes exploded into fire. A line of purple light, sharper than any razor ever could be, cut down into the ground between himself and Potter. It cut right down to the cliff base, and the ground began to shake. For a moment his human shape wavered, and then he wrought a quick doorway to the nearest world, jumping backwards into it within a cloud of purple smoke and exploding fire.

He glimpsed Potter before he disappeared beyond the Boundary, and roared when he saw the smile on the boy's face. He would pay for this, pay with more life and pain than he scarcely could imagine. It was not over, never over, it had only just begun.

Harry smiled as Allarius vanished, pleased about what had just happened. *It had gone well*, he thought. Again he wasn't aware of the mad smile on his face, and was only just vaguely aware of the ground shaking beneath his feet.

Frowning now, Harry felt the entire cliff, ton upon heavy ton, shake and begin to... slip, was the right word. The cliff was falling away, a parting cut from Allarius. He turned in a spin, seeing the air before him, his own gateway, rend open and make a door fifty feet wide in the air, already crackling with power and forming a circle.

Wind howled and the ground fell away. Harry ran, he ran to the very precipice of the cliff and then jumped, trusting to luck now more than anything else. The ocean roared as the cliff face fell into it, and a massive wave was forced up and out in ripples against the tide. Ocean water was also being pulled up into the growing circle before him, in streams of glowing magic and life.

Lightning and fire bordered the cut in the air, his way home, and the force of the pulling black hole pulled him over forty feet to its event horizon. He was spinning, spinning in the air hundreds of feet above the ocean about to be sucked into the space between universes. He was spinning, spinning and laughing.

Light failed as he simply spun forward into the darkness of the blood magic before him. Harry gasped as he was submerged in piercing cold water. The cold stabbed him like a thousand sharp needles and all the air was thrust from his lungs. He had felt nothing like this for six months, and he welcomed the pain of universe travel.

Oh God, it felt good. He continued to laugh with no regard as he was thrown across infinity in impenetrable darkness. His scar upon his forehead, the famous lightning bolt, practically exploded with pain, and blood filled his eyes.

Harry never thought that he would be glad that his scar was bleeding. He was going home, he knew it. It had felt like a lifetime had passed in six months and now he was finally going home.

Home, his own universe. He was going home!

*He had never been further from it.*

## Chapter 23 - Existence Denied and Fate Torn

*Abandon hope, all ye who enter here.*

~~Dante

Imagine one life, upon one world, circling one star, within one solar system, within one galaxy, within one cluster of galaxies, within a single universe no bigger than a grain of sand, and you begin to understand how small everything is in the measure of Existence.

But despite that, one life is connected to everything, to it all. Existence is a thin canvas, a piece of fabric weaved so tightly that the stitches and threads are all but invisible, making its surface smooth and frictionless.

If something were to bore a hole through that weaving pattern in just the right place, the whole canvas could fall, could snap because of its tight bounds. If two, who are connected in one world, found their connection spread across universes and did, inadvertently, burn a hole in just the right place... where and what would that place be?

Weaving threads.... changing patterns and lives... an infinite number of alternate universes and lost thoughts... somewhere all these threads have to meet.

What could be found at such a place, where the threads of existence cross one another to hold themselves, and everything, together? The throne of the Creator, many believe, or His tombstone.

To burn a hole through this meeting point would be most unwise... and the destruction that would erupt from such a thing would be all but unstoppable. Nothing and no one has ever stood at the Ways of Twilight, at the Throne, at the very Godhand.

Least of all a mortal... but that could change... would have to change, if existence was to save even the smallest chance of salvation.

\*~\*~\*~\*

?

Moving outside of time and space, hurled along infinite, everywhere at once and absolutely nowhere at all, Harry held his head in his spinning hands and tried, desperately, to make it stop.

It wasn't like the first time... no... the first time had been bliss compared to this, to this... he didn't know what it was, only that it was dirty, broken, dying. The Boundary roared and the Stream curdled itself into blood. It was degraded, a physical representation of the fire eating away at the canvas of Existence.

Harry was sick, again, dry retching whatever was in his stomach - mostly spit and water.

Lights, bright and dim, flashed and exploded in deafening roars around him in this almost void. He felt himself being pulled in a thousand different directions, could feel the taint of evil everywhere except within himself, and that was perhaps the worst thing of all.

Every breath he took made him want to die, and killed him a little more. Swirling, spinning, crying. It was never easy, it would never be over, nor would it ever be fair.

Within his own head Harry heard something screaming, and knew it was Ethan - or what remained of him. He ignored it, could do nothing else as the weight of the sickness here pressed down upon him, driving him hard into the cold unforgiving sea of... nothing.

He screamed as his body was submerged in biting cold water, pushing the air from his lungs and stabbing him like a thousand knives. Caught in a swift current, he remembered this from the first time he'd entered the space between worlds. The sickness was still there, but it was as if he had outrun it for a moment, ducked under its radar. He was thrown through the water towards a bright light, and given a glimpse of the infinite once again.

He was no longer submerged in cold water but stood high atop a mountain. Stars stretched on for an incomprehensible distance and he fell backwards from the clear shock of how far he could see into the Universe, and how insignificant he was against it.

Perhaps not as insignificant as he had been six months ago.

Strangely, his only thoughts at this moment were of Ginny... and then Ron and Hermione. He suddenly felt as if it may be years, decades, before he saw them again - if ever. The thought made him scream in defiance, he was going home and nothing and no one would stop him.

Death to those who tried. Death and pain.

Against his will, his heavy eyelids closed and he fell as the ground beneath him disappeared. He fell, and sleep took him - that was unavoidable.

When Harry awoke he saw a thousand pinpricks of light had surrounded him. They were like little stars, but he reached out and grasped one in his hand. It was warm to the touch and felt like a drop of water. Suddenly the 'drops' of light began to spin around Harry incredibly fast, until they became a blur of nothing that disappeared before his eyes.

A howling wind rang throughout the darkness around him, and for a moment Harry could not breathe as he was tossed across vast distances and through endless space. He gasped desperately for air and after a moment it returned, as did the light. The tiny pinpricks of starlight surrounded Harry once again, only this time they began to join with one another, creating bigger balls of light. This happened for several minutes, although time had no meaning here, and when it was over a ball of light about the size of Harry himself floated in the darkness in front of him.

Harry stared at it with unconcealed fury, his hands forming fists as he floated in the darkness with only this light... this... this... *Guardian*. Emotion, rage, anger, pain, fury, loss and regret washed over Harry as he beheld the sphere of unchanging bright light, silhouetting him against the darkness.

This being had sent him to a world against his will, because of a mere thought. It had sent him there to save that world, but hadn't known about the potential of his power and the burning link in his scar. It had started it all, started the destruction however good its intentions had been.

Harry glared at it, and said, "The road to Hell is paved with good intentions, you bastard."

The light quivered, if Harry hadn't known better he would have thought it shook with the same rage he did. But then, he didn't know any better, it could have been--

"*WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?*"

A voice so loud, so deep, so commanding filled every corner of Harry's mind and he screamed as his eardrums threatened to burst. His hands flew up to hold his head again, but he maintained his glare on the Guardian. Nothing could have broken that.

"WHAT HAVE I DONE?" Harry responded in kind, amplifying his own voice with what power he could. "YOU SENT ME TO ANOTHER WORLD, ANOTHER UNIVERSE! YOU'RE RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS... MESS."

"*WRONG!*" The voice of the Guardian fell almost to nothing when he said, "*You changed the rules, you broke the Stream and the Boundary, the mortal worlds are failing and the DEMONS HAVE BROKEN FREE! CHAOS, WOE, PAIN - EVIL HAS WON!*" The Guardian finished with a roar.

Harry tried to reach the light, tried to swim forward in this floating darkness, but he was held tight. Too tight, really. He felt the strain of invisible, painful bonds, and began to struggle against them.

Gritting his teeth, Harry tensed his muscles and continued to glare in defiance. "Evil hasn't won... not till I'm dead, and even then you never know. And as for those demons, I'm taking care of them."

"*You fool,*" the Guardian hissed, still quivering. "*It is beyond healing now... beyond salvation. You're actions have placed Creation in front of a firing squad, and there is nothing we or any mortal can do about it.*"

Harry seethed. "You give up too easily."

*"No... your death may slow the sickness, a small price to pay for a few more precious seconds of Existence."*

Harry had been working against the shield that held him, feeling along its edges with his mind. He knew its weaknesses, and was more than a little surprised to discover he held more power than this Guardian. He could destroy it if it came to that... and with what had just been said it might.

But he hadn't come this far to continue to destroy... he'd come to heal, to fix it.

"Help me undo what has been done," Harry said. "Help me fix it. If I go back - If I go back to the day I first entered the Boundary and... change a few things. If I stop you from sending me to that second world... and returning me to my own, none of this would ever have happened."

Something, the Guardian, screamed, and Harry felt all the air leave his lungs as he was hit hard with what felt like a sledgehammer. The basilisk armour absorbed most of the blow, but it still hurt.

*"You truly are a fool,"* the light shook, and began to spin around Harry fast. *"What you seek to do is impossible... time flows forward in the Stream, only ever forward. IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO SWIM AGAINST IT. IMPOSSIBLE, I SAY."*

Harry frowned. "Not in the mortal universes, as you call them. I've travelled backwards a few hours there."

*"NO! A few hours? HOURS! Not even a fraction of a grain of sand on the beach of Time. That is the limit, no more than placing your feet on the bottom of the Streambed for an instant. No, you will die an--"*

Harry broke the bounds holding him with a thought and leapt through the air at the Guardian. Surprise emanated from the glowing sphere but then Harry fell onto it. He gasped, and fell into a memory.

*Slytherin, now impaled on Gryffindor's sword, let fall his own weapon. He felt the cold steel of the sword run through his body and out of his back. He looked at Gryffindor, to his left, and saw the sadness in his*

eyes. *With what little strength he had left, Slytherin spoke. "Well, my old friend. It came to this."*

*Gryffindor didn't say anything. Even when Slytherin smiled. "This is not the end, Gryffindor. It may be my end, but not this war's end. My descendants will finish what I've started. This world will be purged of the Muggle scum yet. The war has only just begun." And then he laughed. For a man so near death, Gryffindor was astonished he could do this.*

*After a moment of that laughter Slytherin coughed, and in so doing brought up some blood. Gryffindor felt that what Salazar had just said was probably the truth. It would happen. So before he spoke Gryffindor made a decision. "This war has just begun, Slytherin. And as long as one of your descendants strives to kill all those who are innocent, I promise you that one of mine will be there to stop him." Gryffindor's face became hard, serious. "For however long this war lasts, I take a magical oath now. I swear that those who follow in my blood line will be protectors of the innocent. Sworn to fight your line and those that serve it. Until the ending of the world if needs be."*

With a grunt, Harry was pushed backwards and away from the Guardian. His jaw fell open as he stared at the floating sphere of light, at... at...

"How is this possible?" he asked quietly.

The Guardian did not shake anymore, did not scream or rage, did not move. If anything, Harry thought he heard it sigh. *"Memories of... of my previous existence,"* it said.

Harry overcame his shock for just a moment, and whispered, "You were... are... Godric Gryffindor."

Harry felt the sphere of light smile; it seemed full of an infinite sadness. *"Once upon a time, Harry Potter... once upon a time."*

Long minutes passed in uncomfortable silence, lives and memory stretching across time and space were converging before these two beings who stood in the darkness of the thin layer that separated and held together everything.



"I don't understand," Harry whispered.

The Guardian sighed again. *"It is not your place to, not anymore."*

"What is my place?" Harry asked, feeling for another shield and finding none. *Good.*

*"To die,"* the sphere whispered. *"To die."*

It was said with such a cold certainty and at the same time with a breaking heart that Harry felt unshed tears spring into his eyes.

Hanging his head and sniffing, Harry found he was shaking again. Not with anger or rage... not with power... with pain. Emotional pain. *When did it all become too much?* he wondered. How long had it been building, everything on his shoulders, corpses of his friends and enemies piling up behind him - a monument to his power.

*A monument founded and cemented in blood.*

"I am your descendant," he managed, after an eternity of painful memories swam across his mind's eye. "You are my ancestor. Gryffindor... Potter... you swore a blood oath to end the war, that I would end the war, there is no hope if I am dead."

*"None if you live either,"* the Guardian, Gryffindor, said. *"That oath was made in our world, Harry, but it cannot bind me here, I cannot let it."*

Harry didn't blink, did not let any emotion show on his face. "How did you become this... this Guardian?" he asked. "How did you--"

*"I am not the only Guardian,"* it said. *"There are millions if not billions of us spanned across existence in its entirety. If any of them knew I had you.... When we die, Harry, when mortals die in their worlds and universes, some are given the choice of becoming a Guardian."*

"How... why?"

Harry had the feeling the sphere was smiling again. *"Usually the job is offered to the strongest protectors of that age, to the heroes,*

*although I've never liked being called that. It was offered to me when I died, I was offered the chance to protect and watch over my world, though never allowed to interfere - not given the power to interfere - and keep this part of the Boundary clean. If there were any chance of saving it now, after what has happened, you, Harry Potter, would be offered the same choice upon your own death."*

"There is a chance to save it," Harry stressed. "The magic I used to get here mentions time, surely there is something, in all of existence, that can return me to that day within the forest outside of Hogwarts, of your school, and change it."

*"Nothing,"* the Guardian sighed. *"We have too little time for--"*

"I don't accept that," Harry growled, clenching his fists. "I've spent years fighting enemies I've never wanted, and I'm still alive. I've had my body and mind tortured, I'm a mess of scars and I'm not entirely certain if I'm sane anymore... but," and here he smiled, "I've never given up. We don't give up."

The Guardian spun again, in a spectrum of colours around Harry in this vast void. *"When a mortal ascends to become a Guardian, Harry, they are infused with the knowledge of every other Guardian since the moment of creation, since the Creator worked his magic. And I am telling you that nothing...."*

The Guardian trailed away to nothing, and Harry heard it gasp.

"What?" Harry asked. "I felt... you thought of something."

*"The Ways of Twilight,"* the Guardian gasped, and said the name with such reverence that Harry thought he should get down on his knees before it. He shook his head to clear that thought.

"The what?"

*"No... impossible... not since the Beginning... never found."* Harry saw that it was talking to itself, he was forgotten for a moment. *"Not enough time... but no other way... if the others find out that I... small price to pay for a slim chance of hope. But the Ways of Twilight, it*

*would have to be there, the link would have had to have passed through there to cause such destruction..."*

Harry understood perhaps one word and meaning in that whole slurred and mumbled speech. When he felt the Guardian look up towards him, he raised his eyebrows expectantly.

*"I'm afraid, Harry," it said. "We are all afraid... nothing, nothing can be done."*

Harry took a deep breath of whatever there was to breathe here, presumably air, and muffled his frustration as best he could. "What are the Ways of Twilight?" he asked.

The Guardian shook, with fear and what could have been disbelief. *"They... they..."* it couldn't say.

"Take your time," Harry said neutrally. "Slowly. What are these Ways?"

*"The throne... the lost Hand..."* the Guardian mumbled, shaking uncontrollably. *"The Ways of Twilight are the resting place of the Creator, where all threads of existence meet and where they all were spun from. Anything is possible there, anything at all."*

Harry nodded. "Sounds like a place to start then," he said pragmatically.

If the Guardian had eyes they would have been bulging. *"You know nothing, Harry, nothing. The Ways have been lost, unreachable, non-existent, since the dawn of the Beginning. Some believe it is where Evil battled the might of the Creator and won... others say it is where the Creator used his might to create Good, at the last minute, and the strength required killed him. They have never been found, never even spoken of so freely until now."*

"Then why did you suggest them?" Harry shouted, anger flashing in his eyes.

*"BECAUSE OF THIS!"* the Guardian, Godric Gryffindor, Harry's ancestor, roared, and a ball of spinning white light exploded from his

form and spiralled through the air in a heartbeat, connecting with Harry's forehead and making him scream in pain as it dug deep into his scar.

His screams dying, Harry blinked his eyes furiously to work away the watery blur that had descended upon them. He worked it away, and as he did a thin beam, no thicker than his thumb, became visible floating just above his right eye. He frowned at it, noticed the thin oily black taint along its length and saw that it disappeared into the darkness, as far as he could see, and for miles upon countless miles beyond that.

"What... is it?" he asked, but he already knew. "It's my link with Voldemort," he said without doubt. "My link with Salazar Slytherin's heir. Our enemy... my enemy. How will this help me find these Ways of Twilight?"

The Guardian shimmered and for a moment seemed to fade. It returned just as strong a moment later. *"You truly do not seem to grasp the size of the destruction this link has caused, will continue to cause."*

"It stretches away into the darkness..." Harry squinted and followed the beam all the way he could, as he moved his head from side to side the beam arced to accommodate that. "How far?"

*"Impossible to tell, Harry," Gryffindor said. "Impossible to find the Twilight Ways... and yet, for this destruction that has been wrought upon Existence, the link, the evil in it, must pass through the Way, through the throne of the Creator."*

Harry felt sick to his stomach, awed even by the fate and destiny and where this was leading. He suddenly felt very, very, very small.

"So if I follow it... if you send me--"

*"I cannot do that, Harry," the Guardian cut in. "I cannot enter or interact with the mortal universes, and this link that has been slowly burning away the stitching of everything passes through hundreds of mortal worlds."*

"What are you saying?" Harry asked... quietly, carefully. It was all starting to make too much sense. "I'm not going home, am I?"

Silence.

*"You follow your link, Harry, you follow it to the end of Twilight, and you can have and do anything you want. Challenge the Creator, or what remains of Him, plunge it all into the void. End Creation with a whimper... anything at all. You could paint a new canvas, a new Existence... you would hold the power of... of it all."*

The Guardian was whispering now, reverent and awed, afraid, no, terrified. A path to the point where all the threads meet had been found, after countless aeons of nothing, and now it was given to a boy, who wasn't sound of mind.

"I could step into any moment of time, within any world, and change it," Harry stated, a dangerous glint shining behind his eyes. "I could."

*"It is madness,"* the Guardian hissed. *"Utter madness."*

"What other choice do we have?" Harry asked quietly.

*"None, and that is what scares me... that it could all come down to this, to something that is more than believed to be a myth now. Although the Twilight Ways are real, what you find there may kill you."*

Harry grinned, unaware he was doing so. "I'll go down kicking and screaming."

*"That's the Gryffindor in you,"* the Guardian mumbled absently, and then he got the feeling that the being of light was looking up at him, appraising him, pitying him. *"There will be no help, Harry Potter, nothing and no one along the long, dangerous miles to wherever the Twilight begins. There will be opposition though, there always is when such power is thrown across worlds, and you are on your own."*

"Whatever happens, happens," Harry replied. "But why is there nothing on my side?" he asked. "I've faced... I've faced demons, a monster born from the darkness eating away this Boundary of yours,

and there has been nothing to battle it but me, and that's nearly killed me. Where... where are all the heroes?"

*"Dead and buried," Gryffindor sighed. "You must understand something, Harry, something that is constant throughout every life in every corner of every world within every universe or plain of existence. Evil has always been stronger."*

"I can't believe that."

*"Believe it or not it is true, Harry. The Creator disappeared moments after He did his work, moments after He created. The power of the Good in the universes disappeared with him. Evil has been allowed to grow unchecked for aeons, and has all but consumed the light in most threads. We have always been fighting a losing battle, we have always been fighting a lost cause."*

Sighing, Harry ran a hand through his hair, noting for the first time a long gash on the side of his palm full of dried blood. He couldn't remember what had caused it, but it must have been Allarius before he'd broken away the cliff. No matter.

"Gotta try anyway, even if that is true."

*"Yes... we have to try, I do see that."*

Harry wasn't listening any longer, a cold dread had settled in the pit of his stomach, had dried out the back of his throat, brought tears to his eyes, and shakes to his hands. He wasn't going home, not yet. He had to bend time around his little finger, and that required this Twilight Way, or whatever it was. He never felt more like giving up.

"You said my scar link travels through many worlds," Harry began slowly, as the Guardian nodded. "How did you know that?"

*"My job as a Guardian, Harry, is to watch over the threads of Existence in my section of the Boundary. There are millions of others watching over their threads, and they all suffer from the same destruction. Your link spans billions, upon billions, upon billions of universes and worlds."*

"And the Ways of... of Twilight, they can be found halfway between the last world I was in, and my own world? That makes sense, considering it has to pass through and come back out somewhere."

*"No... it isn't... distance, Harry, isn't the same here as in the mortal universes. Space bends, changes, curves, jumps... disappears here, whereas it is almost always constant in the universes. The Twilight Ways could be one mile away, or one million. You'd have to follow the link and wherever that leads."*

"But... what if there isn't enough time, what if the Boundary collapses now, while I'm here."

The Guardian shimmered again, and this time changed from sparkling white to glittering blue. *"Every step you take towards the Throne, the Godhand, the Ways of Twilight, should lessen the power of the destructive essence in your scar link, Harry, as you're drawing closer to your own world with every step, and it is only there that it can be confined, contained. Every step you take should help to heal the Boundary, or at least slow the destruction."*

"It all sounds a bit too easy," he grunted. "What aren't you telling me?"

The Guardian sighed, Harry heard it do so clearly. *"Nothing you haven't worked out on your own already, Harry. You will be opposed every step of the way as well. No doubt you've heard of the Darkslayer prophecy... I thought so, anyway, Evil will want to stop you, for more than one reason."*

"Yeah, I'm not very popular in the 'evil' crowd, but I try to get along with everybody."

*"Jest, Harry Potter, you would joke even if your head was on the chopping block."*

"Allarius would have laughed," Harry shrugged. "He'll still be laughing when I kill him."

*"Do not underestimate that demon, Harry. Everything depends on you surviving and winning your way through to the Twilight Ways."*

Harry chuckled. "Allarius is the one who underestimates me... they always underestimate me."

*"It was the same with me,"* the part of the Guardian that was Gryffindor said softly. *"It never gets any easier, you know."*

Harry shook his head. "Sooner I get started the sooner I can put an end to all this crap."

*"Right you are,"* the Guardian said. *"Right you are. I'll put you down on one of the nearest mortal worlds, you must follow the link in the scar, which will remain visible as long as you live, and follow it on foot. The link will jump between worlds through doorways, through gaps in reality - it is these that are causing havoc with the Boundary, close them if you can once you've stepped through them - should you miss one you may never find it again, you must stay on foot... or horseback... Apparation will be too risky-"*

"I'm a griffin Animagus," Harry said. "I can fly--"

*"I sense no ability in you for that transfiguration,"* the Guardian interrupted. *"I did... the first time you entered the Stream, but it is gone."*

"Gone?" Harry frowned, but the Guardian couldn't say why. "I'll... I'll find a way to navigate these... holes... in the air."

*"Good, now--"*

An explosion, beyond deafening, erupted around the two beings and a thousand bright lights sparkled into existence, all a different dozen colours, swirling and breaking, screaming and screeching. Harry held his ears again and waited for it to give over. After a few desperate minutes, it did.

"No..." breathed the Guardian, glancing around at the hundreds of others spinning lights that were merging upon them now, closing in. *"You must run, Harry, you must. This is--"*

**"THE BOY SHOULD DIE!"** a thousand voices roared in unison. **"HE HAS BROKEN THE HOLD, DEFIED THE CREATOR... DEATH!"**



The voices fell silent.

"Friends of yours?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow at the Gryffindor Guardian. He also seized every ounce of his power that he could, and held just short of it exploding into his arms in that electric fire.

They were closing in fast, Harry blinked and they were barely a quarter of a mile away, although that meant next to nothing with their sheer numbers. *"Listen, Harry," the Guardian began hurriedly, "they'll kill you without question. I only let you speak because you are family, and that is a bond beyond anything I swore as a Guardian."*

**"KILL HIM!"** the other Guardians roared, obviously not realising that Gryffindor was on his side, was helping him. Not realising yet... but they would both die the moment one of them did.

"I want to go home," Harry sighed, glaring in every direction.

*"Just know that no matter what happens, Harry Potter, no matter what comes and what wars you fight, that there is always a chance for redemption. Worlds and universes may flee for fear of you, but you are... you are Light, if you understand me. There is a destiny ahead of you none of us can imagine--"*

"Get me out of here," Harry cut him off, gritting his teeth as the heat from all these beings of light began to burn.

Gryffindor, for he was more Gryffindor now than Guardian, nodded. *"You may not have much hope left, Harry, but we believe in you - I speak for every form of life anywhere. We believe in you, you're the only Harry Potter to have come so far, to have entered the Boundary - all the others died or lived different lives."*

**"DESTROY THEM!"** the thousands of lights declared as one, and a thousand streams of white hot light shot forth from their forms, streaming straight for Harry and Gryffindor.

*"You are the only one that matters, you are all that matters. Do what has to be done, for yourself, not for anyone else. Get home, and live your life... take care, Harry Potter. Take care, and shake the*

*foundations of Creation, scream your name aloud at the Ways of Twilight."*

Much like a Portkey, Harry felt a pull behind his navel and knew he was once again hurtling across the vast distances of space, through the void of darkness. A split second he beheld the thousands of lights of the Guardians, and then knew nothing as wind howled in his ears and his eyes moved faster than light.

The howling wind filled his ears and soon the darkness faded and was replaced by a shining white light in every direction, the only other colour was his shadow reflected across the long miles behind him. There was a sound like the tearing of paper and a deep gash opened in the space before him, and a gust of rushing wind pushed him up and into it.

Instantly a great weight seemed to be lifted from Harry's shoulders and a world sprang to life around him. Dripping down like water on a pane of glass, covering the blackness and replacing it with colour and reality.

With a tremendous effort, Harry pulled himself up in the dirt and sat with his arms spread out behind him to keep him steady. He looked around, biting back a headache, and sighed. It really was getting to be too much.

"Where am I?" he asked the air around him.

The thin golden beam stretching out from his forehead disappeared out and over the horizon, as far as he could see. He glanced at the thick oily taint upon that golden beam, and could scarcely believe that it could cause so much chaos.

*You're the only Harry Potter to have come so far*

What to make of that?

Harry didn't know, but it made him feel responsible now. He was the cause and the solution... out of billions of worlds he was alive or dead on, he was the only one to have travelled universes. Unbelievable, that all other paths led away from his... but somehow right.

He stood up, brushing the dust from his jeans and checking his equipment. His wand and pistol were still strapped respectively to his wrist and jeans. The basilisk armour was secure and the shirt he wore over it was clean enough. Sighing again, he surveyed the landscape.

There wasn't much to see. It was mostly flat desert plains as far as he could see, although a few hills did break the uniformity of those plains every now and again, as did trees and waves of grass. There was no sign of human habitation, of civilisation, and all Harry could see before him was an endless blue sky and the thin beam from his forehead.

*Well, he thought, if I have to follow it might as well get going...*

He stood upon a dirt road of sorts, and he supposed that that was some sign of civilisation because it had to lead somewhere. He hesitated, scuffing the dusty road with his boot heel, and then took the first step forward. It was one of many.

Memories, information, cause was flowing through his mind so fast that he almost didn't see the road before him as he stumbled along it for the next few hours, the sun sinking lower into the west behind him, stretching out his shadow ahead of him.

He thought of the little things, of spending time with Ginny for those final few days they had had together in his real world. It was hazy now, those memories, as if the were half forgotten or becoming lost. He tired of trying to recall them, and thought ahead to whatever future now lay at his feet.

*One road, he thought, how many more will I walk before this is done?*

He didn't have an answer, wouldn't for years.

Allarius also hung in his mind, Allarius and his demon army. He knew that was ahead, that it would be hard, and that he would face it nonetheless. He had proven himself more than a match for Allarius, or so he thought, when the demon had underestimated him atop of the cliff.

It would still be one hell of a fight though.

Night fell and the beam of the scar link shone brightly in the dark, making the oily taint running across it more visible. Harry wondered if others would be able to see it, and what their reactions would be if they did. He couldn't summon up the will to care anymore. He was just walking now.

Another hour or two passed in darkness before Harry began to think about stopping and finding somewhere to rest, even if it was outside. He could create fire and use warming charms, after all, but just when he was about to fall on the side of the road, he came across the first signs of humans, beside the road, on this world.

Running down into a valley of sorts, the road winded in and around the ruins of great stone buildings, towering columns and broken tile and concrete ceilings. He thought of Rome, for some reason, and then recalled the pictures he had seen of that city. It was a collection of ancient stone statues, buildings, and towers.

Whatever this place had been though, it was long abandoned. Grass and nature as a whole had reclaimed the structures. Mossy vines grew up the sides of most of them, and wind and sand had weathered the stones smooth around the edges.

He headed on down anyway, and passed through the ruins silently, careful not to disturb anything. His visible link bent and weaved through these ruins, crossing over and around the buildings. It seemed incapable of moving through solid objects. It always went around or over the ground and obstacles. A contradiction, it seemed, of the fact that it could burn holes through universes to reach him.

His legs and feet aching, Harry fell back against a raised stone wall near the road, sitting on the side away from the road to avoid unwanted eyes if any happened upon him while he slept. Before he settled down properly, he removed the small trunk from his pocket, enlarged it, and took out his black cloak.

A warming charm, a cushioning charm for a pillow, and he sat down in the darkness alone, wrapping his cloak about his self - negating the cool night air. For half an hour or so he sat huddled up in his cloak

against the side of the archaic wall, glancing up at the alien sky - not recognising any of the constellations. One star, in particular, was shockingly bright, as was the moon that hung huge in the sky as a crescent.

Sleep overwhelmed him, troubled sleep of course, and Harry spent his first night in this world alone. Once again, it would be the first of many across Existence.

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Sacrifice he had made before. Life he had ended with a wave of his hand. Time... he intended to change. Harry spent the next week or so, he couldn't remember exactly, counting the nights didn't seem to work... the days were longer here, how much longer he couldn't know, but more than twenty four hours.

He didn't see any sign of life beyond the ruins and the road for many days. The dusty road ran, for as far as he could tell, in a straight line along the length of this land. Never changing direction, in parts run down and covered with debris, but in most manageable. His link ran along the road as well, which was all to the good because the country on either side became rough in parts - rocky and tree covered. He didn't fancy walking through that.

As for walking, Harry wasn't sure how far he managed to walk each day. He estimated about fifteen to twenty miles, counting breaks and power. He found he could walk longer when he was holding his power, just out of reach but feeling it inside of him. He felt more alive, stronger, less tired the longer he held it. So distance was a struggle to measure.

At times he had to stop and heal blisters that developed on his feet. He wasn't used to walking so far, and he hobbled from the pain. Twice a day he did this, and each time it felt beyond simple relief.

Walking did grow harder after a few hours though, with or without the power. It was to do with the scar on the shin of his right leg. It had been broken of course, that leg. In a broom flight to Hogwarts over a year ago now that he scarcely remembered. That year had been the year the war became a whole lot more real.

Anyway, a deep throbbing pain in that shin made him limp after a few hours walking. He supposed there were limits to the healing capabilities of magic....

Also, the urge to Apparate came upon him more than once, but he remembered the Guardian's warning. If he Apparated to far... the link could disappear into another world, and he might never find it again. It kept him on his toes, in every sense of the phrase.

There was also the griffin transformation he tried whenever there was a free moment, which was whenever he wanted because there was nothing out here but the trees. And try as he might with that, he couldn't find the spot in his mind, the button he visualised to press and transform - it was gone.

A suspicion as to why this had happened, as to why he had lost it, had been playing in his mind for days. He had little to do besides think anyway, and it always came back to the loss of the griffin earring. The vampire woman had torn it clean out, well... maybe not so clean... but *removed* it, to say the least.

On the edge of his memory, he could recall getting that earring;

*"That is a nice choice, pure 24 carat gold, the man in Egypt said that it had some magical properties as well, but he didn't know what they were... anyway... twelve Galleons and it's all yours."*

Unknown magical properties, it was highly likely that that could have had a hand in his transformations. After all, he had only needed to touch a griffin to master the transfiguration. At the time he had assumed it was another affect of his growing power, and in part it may have been, but with the earring lost it made sense. The earring had been old, magical, and shaped like a griffin.

Twenty two hours or so after it had risen, the sun finally sank beyond the western horizon and the land was bathed in the shadow of night, a universe of stars blinking down upon Harry's lone figure walking the road with a slight limp.

With a sigh, Harry walked down into a nearby dry ditch, alongside the road, and decided he would rest here this night. It didn't matter much

anyway. He would be up and refreshed when there was still several hours of darkness left, a good seven at least. He had managed a fair few miles today, going where he didn't know but at least along the path of his scar link.

Hunger gnawed at his stomach, and it growled in response. Mumbling to himself but unaware of doing so, Harry pulled out his shrunken trunk and enlarged it. He had found, however many days ago now, a tree that bore fruit much similar to an apple - but was clearly not an apple. Kicking open the lid, Harry removed an armful of a capsicum shaped green fruit, that did taste like an apple.

There had been a grove of these trees alongside the road and in parts covering it about one hundred miles back, and Harry had enlarged the trunk - which was bigger on the inside - and took as many as he could. He didn't, after all, know where his next meal was coming from, and he had seen nothing but a few birds in this land since arriving... so...

Transfiguring a stick into a deep bowl was as easy as blinking, as was conjuring water a moment later. As long as the raw materials were there, and in this land there was enough moisture in the air to do so, Harry could conjure water. It lessened his worries, and that helped.

"Bit cold..." he mumbled, knowing no one was around to hear. Nevertheless he gulped down the clear liquid and refilled the bowl with a thought.

The apple-like fruits were crunchy, but a little bruised from being carried around in the trunk. Harry ate eight of them, wishing for something else, and did manage to conjure a thin biscuit of sorts. It was a change, and that helped.

As he placed the bowl on the ground, he couldn't help the slight shake his hands gave as he let it go. Gritting his teeth, he clenched his hands into fists until the shaking stopped. He wouldn't show his fear, wouldn't show the fear that was all but tearing him apart now. He was alone, in what appeared to be an empty world. Entire universe separated him from those he truly cared for, those he loved, and responsibility weighed down upon him like a mountain.

A mountain that just kept getting heavier, and no matter what he did or said to try and fool himself into accepting this life, nothing helped. He felt the years stretching ahead of him, years of nights like this until, one day, he stood at the Twilight Ways... the shaking in his hands returned, and no amount of warming charms or hard thoughts could stop it this time.

*He was alone in a universe that could be empty, and there were many more ahead.*

Harry slept with a frown that night.

\*~\*~\*~\*

Harry didn't know when or how to expect one of those openings in the air the Guardian, *Gryffindor*, had told him about. So far his scar link had just been moving forward in a relatively straight line, but he knew every step he took reduced the damage, reduced the amount of influence the evil in it had upon this world at least.

It would lessen with every step he took towards the centre of the tapestry, of the canvas of Existence, at the point where all the threads became one and knitted together. *The Ways of Twilight*.

He had had a lot of time to think about that, and grow use to the idea. *To do what no one had ever done, even dreamed of doing...* he thought. *I'll only use it for one purpose.*

Anything could be changed, created, destroyed at this place. He knew he was strong enough not to change anything that mattered. That was his choice....

Abruptly, after two weeks upon this world, he caught sight of a bend in the air ahead of him - simply writhing there, caught in the wind and suspended with a glowing golden light. He saw the link in his forehead stretch and disappear into it.

Five minutes later and he stood before it, shaking his sore leg and flexing the muscle there almost absent-mindedly. Panting, as it had turned out warm today, he glared at this bend in reality - saw nothing



but a road similar to this one through it, and then stepped around behind it, until it disappeared entirely as if it had never been there.

The link disappeared as well, but he could still feel it there - like a ring he had worn for months. There was nothing to show that the bend had been there now that he stood a few feet behind it, so moving back around Harry sighed with relief when it popped back into existence.

He had been wise not to Apparate... not only was it unreliable in these broken days, but he would have missed this by miles, and would've had to have backtracked. He could have ended up half a world away. Time wasted was time lost was time he didn't have.

Not wasting that time, Harry stepped through the gap without a moments more hesitation. There was a feeling... a feeling like... breaking a soap bubble, filmy wrap clung to him and then he burst through it, stepping onto an identical road to the one that stretched behind him in another world.

Without realising he was doing it, Harry's eyes scanned this new area for danger.... left... right... up and down. Satisfied but still wary, he turned back to the tear in the air. The Guardian had advised closing it if he could, slow down the destruction... redeem himself, perhaps.

*No... he told himself. Nothing in my life is that easy.*

That said, he didn't have to waste time figuring out how to close this particular break in reality, as it began to shrink in on itself the moment Harry had stepped through it. He watched it shrink and after about two minutes disappear entirely, leaving nothing but a long road visible in its wake.

Harry sniffed, thankful for small miracles, and beheld this new world. It felt clearer, for some reason, more real than the last one did. A hawk, or an animal that resembled one, flew overhead and screeched before disappearing over a rise. That same road stretched ahead of him though, and Harry couldn't stop the sigh that escaped his lips, nor the renewed trembling of his hands.

He didn't know what was ahead, how many miles there were to walk and how many enemies to defeat. He knew Allarius was still out there, somewhere out there... and then there were the dark creatures he had made enemies of. Killing a vampire left a mark on the killer, visible to all other dark creatures... marking him as an enemy of the Dark and a warrior of the Light.

It would be an interesting time, a trying time, but so far it had only been a lonely time.

"One could go insane with no one to talk to," he said with a wry smile, shaking his head and then setting off along the road, following the golden and black stained link streaming out of his forehead.

*You got me, Potter,* Ethan Rafe spoke up for the first time in weeks... or months. Time had been different in that last world. *We could chat....*

"I'm not sure talking to a voice in my head counts as sanity, Ethan," Harry replied, glaring at the ground and then up at the unseen miles ahead.

*I'm working on getting out of your head, Harry... well, projecting myself before you at least, if you understand me.*

"I don't in the least," Harry stated.

*It's a surprise I'm working on... something to pass the time, what little of it you have.*

"Don't get in my way, Rafe... don't get in my way," Harry sighed.

Silence for the rest of that day, and it was welcome.

\*~\*~\*~\*

*If the dream should fall, could you make it on your own?*

Harry woke with a start, the final moments of his dream falling away like flour through a sieve. He struggled to remember... anything about it, something was important. Something--

Harry paused, and his pose became rigid as he noticed, for the first time, half a dozen crossbows pointed at his forehead, and three swords resting against his neck. He took the smallest of breaths, and glanced up slowly at the people around him... careful not to move quickly, keeping his hands at his sides....

"Good morning," he managed, swallowing and feeling the blades on his neck slip.

Standing around him in this glade on the side of the road he had made camp of the previous evening, were nine people - all armed - all grim faced. Five women and four men, all unblinking.

"It is not safe to be out on the road alone, stranger," the nearest woman - the one with her sword pressed deeply into his throat - said. "There are thieves and worse on this road."

Her eyes darkened, eyes framed by a pale angular face and shockingly dark brown hair. She, and the other eight, wore clothes that looked... old... to Harry, woollen jackets and shirts. He wondered for a moment just how advanced this world was. He also took note of the darkening of her eyes when she mentioned the 'and worse' on the road.

"I've got nothing on me worth stealing," Harry said truthfully. Nothing a thief could make use of anyway. A shrunken trunk, the clothes on his back, and that was all that was visible. Except for his wand holster and pistol holster of course, but if the people of this world were not so advanced then perhaps they would overlook that. "My name's Harry, by the way."

"I am Tarishma, Harry," the woman said, rolling his name over her tongue, her eyes and manner still unreadable. Although a sword to the throat did show caution, at least.

"You have your sword against my neck," Harry stated the obvious, keeping eye contact with this Tarishma, who seemed to be the leader of the group.

An unexpected smile brushed Tarishma's otherwise harsh features. Harry put her age somewhere in the mid-twenties. "We thought it wise, Harry, judging from the smell."

Harry chuckled laughter, trying to stop it because those blades weren't giving an inch, and the rise and fall of his throat was dangerous. He knew after several weeks of long, hard days upon the road he would be none too fresh - and he knew he needed a shave as well. He wasn't growing a beard, precisely, because after all was said and done he was only seventeen, but whiskery hairs some half an inch long covered his chin and neck. He just hadn't been bothered with it really.

He hadn't expected to see anyone alive... he had killed billions across all worlds with his decisions, after all. At least that is what he thought....

"I've not seen a lake or river to jump in for weeks," he said, again truthfully. He hadn't, having been conjuring his water.

Tarishma frowned. "You have been following the road... the West Lake lies not twenty miles back," she said coolly.

"Must have missed that one," Harry shrugged, or tried to anyway. It was difficult with the swords. "Em..."

"Where are you from, Harry?" the woman asked now. "Your accent is unfamiliar, as is the way you use your tongue."

Harry hesitated, but then replied, "Little Whinging, Surrey."

"Not a place on any map," Tarishma whispered. "On your feet, Harry."

With a wave of her hand, Tarishma removed her own sword and the other two swordsmen did the same. Those holding the crossbows took several steps back, but kept the pointed metal arrows pinned on Harry's head. They saw the armour he wore and were not taking any chances. Stretching his legs, Harry stifled a yawn and pulled himself to his feet, wincing as he did.

He would feign weakness until he knew what his next move was.

"I'd call any man a fool, no matter what his tale was, for him to be out in the world without a weapon in these times," a gruff voice said from behind Harry, and he looked over his shoulder at possibly the hardest man he had ever seen.

This man's face looked like it had been carved from stone - his eyes dark sapphires and nose broken more than once, all under a shaggy patch of grey hair. He had a scar along his left cheek, and was definitely glancing with what may have been a grudging respect at the more than adequate supply of scars upon Harry's own face.

"You been in the wars, son?" he asked.

Harry grinned, and turned back to Tarishma.

"Where am I?" he asked.

Tarishma seemed startled for a moment, but she recovered quickly, her face showing a calm Harry could tell her eyes didn't feel. She was scared... or anxious, by his presence.

"Derris is correct, Harry, are you armed? What is that metal object about your waist, the leather strapped to your arm?"

Harry thought fast. "Derris, is it?" He looked over his shoulder again, glancing at the man with the scar on his cheek. "What's wrong with these times that one would need to walk around armed?"

Derris visibly jumped, and then glanced passed Harry at Tarishma, seeking approval for something apparently. "Well... surely, Harry, surely you've heard of the demons?"

Harry blinked. "Demons... em... big guys, too many eyes, stink worse than I do?"

Derris struggled to comprehend for a moment, but then he seemed to understand. "Yes. They began raiding this country a month ago... King Deschan has called his army to arms, as well as the Mages. Although the demons are damn near impossible to kill - our town has

lost many good men fending them off... they come almost every other night now."

Harry's head spun for a moment as he absorbed that information. Demons... Allarius was here, upon this world... Harry was more certain of that than anything else.

*And so is his army of demons, Ethan whispered, echoing in his mind. Looks like your break is over, Potter. Gotta get back to work.*

The shining and tainted link in his forehead stretched back on up to the road and disappeared around a bend, glittering in the sun the whole way. Harry realised that the nine people here could not see it. Eyebrows would probably have been raised if they could, or at least swords.

Thoughts of Allarius drove his temper high, and Harry clenched his fists, smiling insanely at the memory of that dagger plunging deep into the demons shoulder. He wasn't aware of those around him stepping back in gasps and then falling to their knees.

After a few moments Harry became aware that his arms were glowing faintly with a deep blue light, and those little crackles of electric power were jumping across his skin, swirling his cloak and hair about his head. The lightning was also behind his mismatched eyes. As soon as he became aware, the magic fell away like the tide going out after a wave had crashed on the beach.

He was startled to see Tarishma and the others all on their knees before him, offering up their hands and weapons... "What... what are you doing?" he asked them nervously, thrown off for the first time in weeks. He had a headache of sorts, as if he had a hangover, and this wasn't helping.

Tarishma didn't look up, but she said, "You are a mage." Her voice was thick with reverence, with awe, with shame. "You are a mage and I ordered blades against your neck. My life is yours."

Harry was even more startled, but he hid it well. "Well..." He heard Ethan laughing like a maniac inside of his head, and then wasn't sure he had. "Well... em... you didn't know I was a- a mage, did you?"

All nine shook their heads quickly, obediently. Harry nodded. "On *your* feet then, Tarishma - all of you - no harm done. Perhaps we can start over--"

"You must come to our village," Tarishma said desperately, and then blushed as she realised how forward she had been. "I forgot myself again, Lord Mage. Please--"

"Village sounds good," Harry said quickly. "If you've got some water I can throw myself in that'd be great."

"As you command," she said, and then motioned for him to move out of the roadside glade and back up onto the road.

Harry nodded and set off that way, noting that they all didn't walk ahead of him. He was playing everything by ear now, but it seemed being able to use magic on this world wasn't a secret, but it also wasn't for everyone - and those who could use it were... *above* those who couldn't. Harry definitely didn't like that, but he would go with the flow for now. If he got a wash and with any luck something to eat besides thin biscuits and apple/capsicums then it was worth it.

Up on the road was a tenth man, sword on his belt, holding the reins of ten horses in his hands and glancing, no, scowling at Harry. Tarishma hit him upside his head and whispered something quickly that Harry didn't catch. The man stopped scowling and nearly fainted.

"How far to town?" Harry asked, and they all jumped.

"Kinfriar lies ten miles along the road, Lord Mage," Tarishma answered, and brought him over one of the horses. Her own if he had learned anything so far of these people.

"Call me Harry," he told her. "And I'll walk thanks. Don't have much experience on the back of a horse."

Her mouth fell open, her dark hair fluttering in the breeze, and then she seemed to remember who she was gaping at, and nodded in a most confused fashion.

"Yer not like any Mage I ever saw," one of the men who had been pointing a crossbow at him ten minutes ago said. "Too young, for one, too young by decades I'd say. Yer not from around these parts either...."

"Talon," Tarishma hissed, and glanced a nervous, almost fearful look at Harry. "Forgive him, Lor- Harry... he is growing ol--"

Harry chuckled, his eyes sparkling dangerously. "It's okay." With a thought he lifted the wrinkled man off the ground, and placed him squarely in the saddle of the horse he had been leading. His jaw dropped and all the colour drained from his face. "I reckon that should alleviate any doubts."

In quick fashion now, the seven others still standing by their horses jumped quickly into the saddle. Tarishma waved her hands and did something odd with her fingers, and two young men and a young woman bowed from the saddle at Harry, before turning their horses down the road and galloping off fast - as if being chased by demons.

Harry supposed they'd gone to warn the town of his arrival. He was beginning to wish he'd never met these people, but at the least he had learned about Allarius... so.

"Would you care for some salted meats, Harry?" Tarishma asked nervously, stumbling over his name. "You appear to not have any food and you must be hungry. Forgive me if I offend...."

"You don't offend," Harry smiled wryly, and Tarishma blushed. "No, it would take a lot more than someone offering me breakfast to offend me. Meat sounds good... I've been living on capsicums and paper biscuits for a fortnight."

Tarishma looked like she had understood perhaps one word in three, but passed Harry four strips of a dry leathery substance. He didn't know what meat it was, but it tasted good, like crispy bacon, and he finished them quickly.

"So...." Harry said, walking at the head of the group even though he was on foot. No one seemed to want to overtake him. Tarishma was



the closest, and then Derris, but they hung back at his shoulders. "Tell me about these demon problems you've been having."

"Not just us, Lord Mage," Derris said, shaking his head and frowning at his horse's head. "The entire kingdom. They appeared a few short weeks ago...."

Harry listened as the miles wore away beneath his feet. The demons had appeared a month or so ago - which could be longer depending on the length of the days here - and had multiplied beyond count. Tens of thousands was Derris' best estimate, and more everyday.

The kingdom of this land, which as far as he could tell resembled medieval England technology and culture wise, had been called to fight the demons who were rumoured to be grouped on the Endless Plains, some hundreds of miles North. Derris' village and several hundred more had borne the brunt of the demons onslaught, but attacks had reached as far as the capital several hundred miles behind them.

They killed without reason, without mercy, and many villages had been wiped out whilst others had tripled in size from the refugees.... which in turn made these villages into towns, and bigger targets. An army to fight them had been raised, led by a King Deschan, drawing more men and swords at every village it passed.

The army would reach the village ahead in a few days apparently, and was only one hundred miles behind them now. As a Mage, Derris said, Harry would be given a position as one of Deschan's commanders - as every mage was needed to fight the demons, to fight another war. And there weren't many mages left.

They all noticed Harry's face grow darker by the word, and Tarishma almost slowed her horse to a stop, but Derris continued, recognising the glint in Harry's eyes as one of a determined soldier.

"If you don't mind me asking... Harry," he said. "How old be you, son?"

"I'm seventeen," Harry said absently, thinking about the demons.... and Allarius. This was another world his problems had begun to

destroy. Derris had mentioned that the summer had been longer and the winter colder than they were used to, especially because the season of autumn had been non-existent this year. But the weather hadn't been as bad as it had been in that world that resembled his own.

*I'm already calling it 'that world'*, Harry thought, biting back painful memories of those who had died for his arrogance and ignorance. He almost stumbled and fell as he saw those painted smiles upon James and Lily... Michael and Melissa. Vengeance he would have, or Existence be damned.

"You've seen more war than a man four times your age," Derris said simply. Not a question, a simple statement. "Men have a look after years spent in war... Yours is deep."

Harry shrugged, placing a hand on his pistol subconsciously. "I've been in one or two scrapes over the years, yes," he replied.

Derris began talking again, about the army coming up behind them and how Kinfriar - his village - was going to present sixty men to the King, and hopefully one mage in a few days time.

Harry's thoughts were all over the place. As near as he could tell his scar link travelled due north ahead of him, and the demons had set up camp... or their slaughter grounds... several hundred miles due north. It wasn't coincidence. Allarius wanted him fighting on grounds of his choosing, against his army. He would undoubtedly be guarding the break in reality that would take Harry one step closer to the Ways of Twilight.

He knew for sure that Harry would have to leave this world that way... So that is where the final battle between him and the demon would be. Harry grinned in anticipation, and looked forward to a wash and some more meat up ahead.

*He had been in a few scrapes over the years... oh yes...* He laughed out loud, and startled the old man Derris so much that he almost fell from his saddle.

Everything was connected somehow, Harry could feel that now. Coincidence didn't exist anymore, if it ever had. He felt certain, no, *he knew* that one day he would stand before the throne of the Creator, before the Ways of Twilight - and there he would unmake history.

He knew that one day, if he stood strong, he would see his home again.... and find the love that waited there.

He knew that one day, nothing of the coming years or the months in the past would have ever happened... remaining nothing more than a memory in his head.

For some unfathomable reason, he felt deeply saddened by that. But he moved on, if Harry could do one thing it was move on.

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## Chapter 24 - The Fire of the Sun

*That's what it takes to be a hero, a little gem of innocence inside of you that makes you want to believe that there still exists a right and wrong, that decency will somehow triumph in the end.*

*~~Lise Hand*

*This town is most hospitable*, Harry thought, lounging in a large stone tub full of steaming hot water. His limbs softened and weeks of dirt and sweat fell away as he relaxed with his head in the groove behind his neck. Twists in his joints he didn't even know he had snapped satisfyingly, and he sighed.

The clean soapy water was brown by the time he was done, and he climbed out with another sigh, wrapping the woollen towel around his waist and drying in the hot rays of sunlight that were blazing in through the clear glass windows across the room.

He had been greeted with all the honour he could have wanted entering this town about a half hour ago. Walking in on the road with a nine horse procession of town soldiers behind him had produced cheers from the hundreds of people lining the dirt streets in front of wooden homes and storefronts.

He had taken only one look at the town to realise he was in a world not nearly as developed as his own. There was no electricity, no water systems beyond a bucket and well, no cars... or anything. Despite being greeted by the hundreds of cheering people and by the bloke who was the Mayor of this town, he had seen the looks in the eyes of these people.

It spoke of horror.

The road on the way in had forked off to a cemetery that was in bloom, for use of a better word, with dozens of fresh flowers adorning the tombstones of recent graves. One dark sign that this land was being ravished by demons on almost a daily basis.

*Well, he thought grimly, they'll have a bit of a surprise the next time they attack.*

His frown became an amused smile as he recalled being named 'Lord Mage' by dozens of the town folk. It didn't sound right, to his ears, and he just hoped that soon he would be on the move again, towards the gap between universes... along the curse link.

That golden beam still stretched unseen by all but him from his forehead, cutting clean through the glass of the windows and bending over and around distant mountains as far as he could see, heading undoubtedly north. Towards country plains he knew housed thousands upon thousands of demons. And Allarius, of course, who was more than just a demon.

With any luck, Harry would arrive there with an army at his back. He never wanted to lead men into battle, to see his plans get people killed, but he was willing to do so now. The thousands of men marching towards this town under the banner of their king had no idea what they were dealing with. Harry would set them straight, and see to it that the army was his.

Unaware that he had been doing it, Harry unclenched his fists as he slowly dried in the sun. He hated that part of him now, the part of him that only thought of how to *use* others to achieve his own aims, however right and noble those aims were. He didn't want to be the hero all the time, didn't want to be the fighter... but there was no one else.

Anywhere.

At all... in the whole of Existence.

It did impart some sense of responsibility upon him.

Standing before a large glass mirror, Harry summoned his wand from across the room into his hand with a thought and whispered a quick word. A razor blade, extremely sharp, sprung from the tip, and - for the lack of any lather - Harry doused his face in cold water and shaved as best he could.

His old jeans and white polo shirt had been sent to be cleaned by the women who had left a range of other clothes for Harry to wear. He was grateful for that, as the jeans were filthy and the shirt worse. Strolling over to the clothes on the table still holding his towel, Harry searched through the pile of wool and leather garments with a sigh.

No jeans. This world didn't have jeans. The closest thing that came to it was a pair of black leather trousers, thick and heavy but that fit nicely. Harry thought he'd look ridiculous in them but they didn't look that bad. He picked up his two halves of chest armour and walked over to the tub to dip them in the water there.

He had been wearing it for a month or so, and it could do with a clean. He used magic as well to scrape the dirt and smell off, before drying it and lopping the thick chords around his sides. He tightened them magically, and the armour melded to his structure - fitting perfectly and lightly.

Of the clothes on the table, Harry picked a thin leather vest to put on over his armour and nothing more. His arms were left bare up to the shoulder, revealing more than one or two scars, but looking in the mirror Harry knew he had a certain air about him.

He looked dangerous, not to be messed with. When he was alone on a strange world within a strange universe with every dark creature a possible enemy just around the corner, he didn't want to look soft. When you got right down to it, survival was what was important.

Anyway, his arms were pale and he thought getting a bit of sun couldn't hurt. It would help to hide the scars at least.

Walking alongside the long stone table Harry picked up his shrunken trunk and placed it firmly in his leather pocket. He also strapped his pistol and wand back in their respective places before doing anything else....

Sighing heavily as a familiar bleakness settled over him, Harry fell back against a wooden chair and sat down with a thud, his eyes a storm of torment and regret. He couldn't help feeling like this these days, even though he did his best to hide it. Less than seven years ago he had been just one life living in a small house that could have

been anywhere, attending a normal school and - despite the Dursleys - living a vaguely normal life.

He looked around himself now, from the leather and armour he wore to the gun at his hip and to the golden link of decay stretching out from his forehead. He couldn't help the long, cold, bitter laugh that escaped his mouth.

*Times have changed*, he thought wryly, *and I've changed with them.*

He looked down to the calluses and burns on the palms of his hands. Wounds and hardened skin from wielding a sword and his awesome power. The crisscross scar on his left palm seemed to stand out mockingly, and he clenched that fist almost to the point of pain. He'd fulfil those blood promises... he would....

*This isn't getting you anywhere*, Ethan whispered inside of his head. Harry longed for the days when he didn't even have one voice inside of his head. He had long since forgotten what that felt like.

"I think I'm entitled to a few minutes reflection a day," he whispered angrily, but with a wry smile.

*You can't seriously hope to get this army to follow you, Harry*, Ethan continued. *Despite all you've done, you're still just a kid.*

*I'm Lord Mage here*, Harry responded using the voice in his head. *From what Derris said there won't be many who can use magic in this army - most have been killed by Allarius from what I can tell - and none who can use it as I can. They'll follow me.*

Ethan snorted a rough sort of laugh. *Your plans never work, Harry. Just setting yourself up for disappointment here.*

"Do you know how I can defeat at least one hundred thousand demons, and Allarius, alone?"

*Run and live to fight another day.*

"Time won't allow it," Harry mumbled. *I won't allow it.*

*Stubborn pride has got many good men killed, Potter. And you're far from a good man.*

"Leave me alone," Harry snarled, waving his hand around as if to swat away an annoying fly buzzing around his head. Echoing laughter faded away in his head as the large wooden door across the room creaked open.

It was the woman Tarishma, Harry saw as she bowed low to him. "Lord Harry," she began, "are you well? The servants told me you were speaking with someone...."

Harry shrugged. "Talking to myself," he said, not exactly lying. "What can I do for you?"

Nodding, Tarishma said, "There is a demon in one of the pits on the outskirts to the north of the town. Despite our best efforts we have been unable to slay it. We hoped you would use your unique talents to destroy the beast."

"Stuck down a hole?" Harry asked and she nodded again. He clenched his fists. "Take me to it."

Harry followed the woman down and out of her stone and wooden house and onto the dirt road that ran through the town and on north as far as the Endless Plains. Outside dozens of people crowded and cheered as they made their way up the street. Harry found himself shaking hands, accepting kisses on the cheek from the village girls, and grave nods from the old soldiers in the crowd. It felt odd really, considering he hadn't done anything for these people yet. He hadn't earned their cheers, so why did they give them?

The crowds behind Tarishma and Harry thinned as it became obvious they were heading towards what had become known over the last three days as the 'Demon Pit'. No one, apparently, wanted to get near the thing. The old man Derris and half a dozen armed soldiers fell in line behind the pair of them though, and five minutes later they reached it.

The town was rather large, filled with hundreds of residents and refugees, and Tarishma told him as they walked that several large



pits and barricades had been built to the north to hinder the demons when they came - and they always did almost every other night. The pits were at least fifty feet deep, dug twenty feet wide by one hundred village men in a day. Vertical walls, once something fell in it was not getting out.

Shacks and cottages fell away as the forest returned along the road and the village fell back behind a hill. Harry began to see signs of conflict and battle upon the earth as he walked, and didn't need to see the grim faces of the others to know that they had all fought here.

The earth was scorched, burnt almost to ash. Dark splotches upon the ground looked like blood, and in the distance Harry could see a pile of rotting inhuman corpses.

"How many times have the demons come?" Harry asked Tarishma.

She jumped, surprised and gazed up at him with an innocence he had never seen before. It was the look of hope from someone who had lost it, and just his presence had caused that. "The Demons have come eighteen times, always in larger numbers and always more ferocious." She paused and then looked at him with a critical eye. "You are the first mage I have ever seen so young, Harry, if you forgive me for saying so."

Harry shrugged. "Yeah... I feel a lot older than I am."

Tarishma frowned.

"We're here," Derris whispered.

Harry heard harsh grunting ahead, and saw three men standing over the large pit Tarishma had described ten minutes or so ago. The sun was high in the sky, but the light seemed to want to bend away from the pit... and Harry knew why. He wondered if the demons were loose on any other worlds. He wouldn't put it past Allarius to do that.

Free from their eternity old prison in the Boundary, the demons were pure hate and pain. He would kill this one gladly.

The stench was almost overwhelming and the demons screeches deafening as Harry and Tarishma approached the pit alone. The six men and Derris fell back, drawing swords and bows and creating a perimeter around the pit. The three men bowed to Tarishma and glanced at Harry curiously as he approached.

"This is Harry," Tarishma told the three men, who were holding longbows. "He is a mage."

One of the men, a tall bloke with a beard scoffed, and Tarishma growled, swinging her dark hair over her shoulder warningly. For Harry's part, he merely smiled and walked over to the edge of the pit. Dirt fell away beneath his feet as he stood on the precipice and looked down into the darkness of the hole.

Tarishma joined him as he pooled his hands together and created a ball of pure magic - of light, and let it float down on the wind to the base of the pit. Harry grimaced and Tarishma gasped as the demon was highlighted. A grotesque, four armed monster glared up into the light and fell silent when it saw Harry.

A dozen mismatched eyes were splattered all over the creatures face and hundreds of arrows protruded from the beast. Tarishma was right; they had been struggling to kill it. It would be suicide to go down into the pit, so the men had been shooting the thing for days and barely breaking its skin. There was evidence of fire and oils in the pit as well, but Harry knew these things walked fire, and were unlikely to burn in the blazes these people could manage.

"You look like you have seen these demons before, Harry," Tarishma noted, her dark eyes staring deeply into his.

"I've killed my fair share," he said, thinking back to Slytherin Fortress and that pocket of time a thousand years in the past. Allarius had sent dozens of the things through, and he had slaughtered them all. "This one should--"

"...Potter..." the thing gargled.

Harry's gaze hardened even further and he flexed his muscles, getting ready to call on his power to annihilate.

"It spoke!" Tarishma exclaimed, and took a step back. A moment later she looked embarrassed to have done so and returned to Harry's side. "Potter... does that mean anything to you, Harry?"

"It's my family name," he whispered, and Tarishma gasped again. "You have something to say to me, demon?" he bellowed into the hole.

The light flared and a harsh gurgling laughter surfaced from the dank depths of the pit. "...death... Potter.... only death for you...."

Harry's eyes blazed and his palms exploded in blue fire, rising up and circling his arms. Tarishma was so surprised she fell back onto the ground behind him. Harry didn't notice, he aimed his power down into the hole and... *fired*. There weren't even any screams, and when he finally let go the hole was two hundred feet deeper. Tendrils of coppery smoke rose from the dirt.

"That's the end of that," Harry sighed, turning around and dusting his hands. He looked down to Tarishma on the ground and muttered an apology, offering a hand to help her to her feet. "Don't suppose there's any chance of some food, is there?" he asked. "As long as it's not an applesicum...." A mad smile lit up his face, and Tarishma was infected by it, smiling herself.

"We can find you something, Harry," she said. "If you are to help us with the guard tonight we need you to keep up your strength."

Harry continued to smile. "I like this world," he told her. "It's quiet... you wouldn't believe how noisy some places can be."

She frowned and gave him a bemused smile. "You do speak strangely, Harry Potter," she began, "and I've never seen a mage with such power. Are you the High Mage in your country of Surrey?"

Harry chuckled. "All of that is a long, long, long, confusing story, Tarishma. I'd love to tell you it, but I don't even understand most of it, if you follow me there. No, I see you don't. Hmm... let's just get some late breakfast and then I'd like to have a look around town, if that is okay?"

"Oh, we welcome it, Harry," she exclaimed. "The soldiers and guard would be honoured to shake the hand of a mage - it is believed to bring good luck in battle."

\*~\*~\*~\*

Harry sat before a large group of children, ages ranging from about six to ten, and pooled light magic in his palms. He smiled and with a thought created two dozen glowing lights that hovered through the air and over to the young group. His hard eyes softened only slightly as he heard their laughter and saw their smiles, running and catching the harmless spheres of light.

On his knee was a plate of crusty bread and various meats. He put a chunk of pork between two slices and chewed on it thoughtfully, glancing in what seemed like a casual manner at all of the people around him and those passing. He still didn't know much about these people, and had long since learnt to expect a knife in the back - or whatever.

He was sitting on a stump outside of the guard house in the centre of town, looking across to a man working iron into a furnace. An array of swords and armour hung outside of his shop, glittering in the high noon sun. He finished his sandwich and washed it down with a wooden goblet of cool water.

He blinked, and two dozen new multicoloured lights erupted from his palms, swirling and dazzling in the air, shining like crystal and floating slowly to the earth like snow. The ten or so kids cried out joyfully and again tried to catch them.

"You're not like any other mage I've seen, Harry," Tarishma said on his left. "You are a lot more human than most."

Harry turned to look at her and shrugged. "Can't say I know that much about these other mages you keep going on about," he said. "Miserable bunch, are they?"

Tarishma frowned. "Were you not trained in the Mage's School, Harry?"

*Hogwarts*, Harry thought, *that counts*. "You could say that... although I learnt a lot more on my own."

"How long have you been upon the road?" she then asked. "How far have you come from your home of Surrey?"

Harry chuckled, and thought of the massive distance between universes - between worlds - and of the small steps he had taken that still amounted to a few hundred miles. He was further from home than he had ever been right now, but it would be changed. "A fair few miles," he said. "What can we expect if the demons attack this evening?"

Tarishma's face darkened, and the other men and soldiers around Harry shifted on their feet and reached for their sword hilts. "It is not a question of if, Harry, but of when. They are due this evening, perhaps a horde of two dozen... it is always more the longer we survive."

Harry nodded. Two dozen he could handle with ease, especially with Gryffindor's sword channelling his strength. He could level mountains with that blade... bore a hole through the centre of the earth. He could destroy this world anyway, with or without the sword. Using that though, it was stunningly simple. He was a madman with the power of God, and what's more he knew it.

Shaking his head, warding away his personal demons, Harry said, "No one will die tonight," he said. "I can destroy two dozen alone."

That said, he got up and walked away - leaving every one of these people in his wake. The look on his face was enough to dissuade any from following. He walked to the outskirts of the town again and sat upon a rotten moss covered log, staring without seeing at the sky.

His hands were shaking again, but that went unnoticed as well. Unaware of anything but a long list of names and faces in his head, Harry shuddered and folded his arms around himself. A cloud strewn sky and a whole lot of nature were the only witnesses to this display, to this remembrance. People he knew, people he didn't, people who were friends and enemies... he saw them all dead, and felt the blood on his hands as if it were really there.

He wiped them on his leather vest furiously, gritting his teeth. He could handle the pain... he could! It wasn't time to fail yet, not with a universe to save and time to put right. But his head did hurt, almost blindingly so. A constant headache that dug deep into his consciousness, inexplicable and yet expected. He had, after all, violated his own mind by taking a quick exit out with Ethan's help those few weeks ago. Some damage was to be expected, but was it getting worse?

Harry thought that might be so, and so did Ethan.

*It can't be helped, the disembodied voice inside of his head said. Do what you can with the time you've got left. Defeat Allarius, head on to the Ways of Twilight. Whatever needs be.*

"It can't... can't end like this. That doesn't seem fair...."

*What have you ever known to be fair, Potter? If life were fair I would have died cleanly, you wouldn't have to worry about your mind caving in on itself, and Existence would be as healthy as a peach. But life isn't fair...."*

"Are you really there?" Harry asked Ethan. "Or are you just another voice in my head, haunting my thoughts?"

*I'm real, Harry. Don't forget that.*

"I seem to be forgetting a lot lately," Harry said truthfully, and a little fearfully.

It was true, after all. He had been forgetting things and then remembering them later, forgetting new thoughts, remembering old useless ones and struggling to recall those after a while. It was troubling. He had spent the past fortnight walking on foot through an empty world and didn't once notice or think of the broom he had buried underneath books, cloaks, and fruit in his drink.

He had been in and out of his trunk at least twice a day, could even recall looking right at the broom, but it just... didn't click. Why not use the broom? That had come to him that morning, on his way into the

town. Why not? He wondered for just a moment if he would remember these thoughts in an hour.

The shaking was getting worse and, despite the heat of the day, Harry's teeth were chattering.

He did not know what to do.

\*~\*~\*~\*

The sun faded in the west and night fell on the village of Kinfriar. A star shot night sky sparkled down upon the group of one hundred men and women guarding the north road and tree line into the town. A familiar practice now and one that always cost lives. The usual town guard was several times that number, but circumstance had robbed this village of its youth.

Wearing cloaks that hid them among the shadows beneath the eaves of trees and behind furniture barriers that they had been constantly rebuilding for weeks, three dozen bowmen held arrows ready in their weapons. Before them disguised in various places were sword and spearmen, ready to give their lives to protect their village and family. The knowledge that the army and the king would be here in a day or so was enough to make them hold this stand one last time.

After that, they would join the ranks of that army, and go wherever that took them. To the Endless Plains, and the evil that festered there perhaps. Death could come before that, could claim them this night, or they could yet live decades. No matter to any of them, really, death always came and denying that was madness.

There was another man standing upon the road with a torch of blue flame. Not hidden, right out in the open, Harry Potter stood alone. A blazing beacon for all that could see, a sign of hope for some, the bringer of death for others. Worlds, Universes, Time, and Eternity swirled around his head in an invisible glittering storm of awesome power. If it could be seen - his aura - it would appear that he shone with the radiance of a thousand heated stars.

But it couldn't be seen, and those who looked upon him only saw the pale blue reflection of the flame he had conjured to the end of his

torch. They only saw a young man standing silently and unafraid before a blanket of darkness. They saw a kid who stood twiddling his thumbs in thought.

*Cold, isn't it?* Ethan said.

*What did you imagine for your life, Ethan?* Harry asked.

Harry heard a grunt and rough laughter echoing off the sides of his mind. *This is exactly what I imagined, Potter. This, and a girlfriend.*

*Is that you or the other you speaking?*

*What does it matter?* Ethan hissed. *No one could have imagined this for their life. I'm just glad I don't have yours.*

Harry chuckled mirthlessly. "What do you do all day in there?" he asked out loud.

Harry felt Ethan shrug. *I look out at this world from behind your eyes. See your thoughts and watch your memories. I've been working on my surprise as well.*

"Surprise?"

*I've been trying to make your eyes see me.*

*Do I want to know anymore?* Harry swallowed.

*Patience, Potter. I've almost cracked it... give me a few more days and we can have a conversation face to face.*

Harry shrugged. *Just don't mess up things inside my head more than I already have.*

Harry blinked and remembered the world around him now. His pale torchlight cast a ring of blue light into the darkness for a few feet in every direction, but that was it. There were no stars now, the clouds having moved in fast, the sky completely overcast, and the darkness was all but absolute.



He heard footsteps behind him and turned to see Tarishma stepping lightly towards him along the dirt road, her sword sheathed and bow drawn and nocked with an arrow. She moved up a few paces on his left - her face a mask of worry and concern, eyes flicking nervously to his torch and then to him. She wore a heavy set of chain-linked armour draped over her shoulders and covered with a cloth vest bearing a strange marking that looked like a cross on top of a diamond.

"Any minute now, Lord Potter," she said formally. "The scouts have returned... all but one... and report burning beyond the distant hills."

*All but one*, Harry thought - assuming the worst, *so much for nobody dying tonight*.

"Give me that arrow," he said, thinking fast.

Tarishma frowned but raised her bow, loosing the arrow and handing it to Harry. Trained well, she slung another from her quiver across her back and nocked it the same.

Harry ran his fingers down the long, smooth and strong wooden shaft of the arrow, placing the metal tip flat on his left palm, the feathers on the end tickling his shoulder. He closed his hand gently around the tip and a beam of white light emanated from his fist, seeping out through the gaps between his fingers and thumb. It vanished and he handed it back to Tarishma.

"What--" she began.

A faint white glow still surrounded the tip of the arrow and every other second a crackle of blue light jumped its length and was absorbed back into the metal. "Make sure that one hits its target," Harry said. "Boom..."

He smiled wryly and turned back to the long road, straining his eyes through the darkness. He heard Tarishma switch arrows again, and wondered briefly how he had just done what he did. It had felt right, once he had that arrow in his hands. Natural, perfectly normal, like he had an affinity with the weapon. It had felt the same with the pistol

hanging from his waist, and the automatic rifles in his trunk. These were not happy thoughts.

*Trust I seek.*

Harry blinked. *Did you say something?* he asked Ethan.

No answer.

*Are you really there?*

"Look...." Tarishma breathed over his shoulder, her voice shaking slightly.

Harry looked and saw. Ahead on the road a long trail of fire was now visible, bending away out of sight around a distant hill. It had to be the demons. Every step they took ignited any material into flames. Even dry stone, or snow - which promptly melted, of course.

"How well can you shoot that thing?" Harry asked, not able to count the numbers on the road ahead yet. A quarter mile away maybe. He heard bows being drawn and swords being unsheathed behind him and around in the trees.

"I can crack a nut in half at two hundred yards," Tarishma said proudly, drawing back the string tautly.

Harry nodded, and reached over her shoulder to remove a handful of arrows from her quiver. The wind blew her hair into his face and he pulled away sharply, shaking his head. In his hand were half a dozen of the long wooden arrows. He pushed them down into the ground at Tarishma's feet. Then one at a time removed them, fused them with magic, and put it back.

Half a minute later and eight arrows were poised and ready to use before Tarishma, and she smiled uncertainly at him - fear in her eyes. On the wind now they could hear the gurgling of blood in rotten throats, catch the smell of decomposing flesh. Harry readied his magic as best he could, just on the edge of it exploding into his palms, and faced the coming enemy.

"When you think you can hit the first one," Harry whispered to Tarishma now on his left. "Loose the arrow as true as you can and grab another one. Those arrows are gonna pack one hell of a punch."

Despite the fear showing in her dark eyes, Harry didn't see her hands shake as she took aim with the bow, an arrow still taught in the notch. Embedding his torch into the ground, Harry quickly conjured a dozen coin sized balls of bright light, and sent them shooting out down the road at select intervals, lighting the whole thing up like a Christmas tree. The demons could suddenly be seen.

Gasps and cries of rage and fear rang out behind Harry and a dozen arrows flew passed him towards the dozens of vile creatures limping and screeching their way up the ancient road. They all fell short of their mark by at least fifty feet and Tarishma cursed.

"HOLD!" she cried, even as another four arrows shot by the two of them.

"Excitable, this lot," Harry smiled, feeling the intense rush of adrenalin that always accompanied a fight. He struggled to remember when he had last been afraid of that rush, and couldn't. End of his fourth year at Hogwarts, perhaps... maybe fifth year and the Ministry hearing... or at the Department of Mysteries.

Never mind!

Tarishma took careful aim, looking down her sight with fearful but expert eyes. Her hands didn't shake and she lined up a shot to the nearest creature, her arrow crackling slightly with power. Harry watched emotionlessly as she loosed the arrow, a sharp twang shattering the night air and a cone of power bursting from the tip as it rocketed through the air.

True to its mark, the first demon - a hideous creature with three dozen eyes splattered over its chest, five rotting limbs and a stringy tendril of dead flesh hanging from its face - exploded in a fountain of white light. The concussion wave from the impact knocked another six demons to the ground, made the others stumble and shriek in fury.

Tarishma cried out in surprise and joy and quickly fitted another arrow into her bowstring. Surprised with the success of the first arrow, Harry snatched the rest of normal arrows from her quiver and began enchanting them. With any luck the creatures would be destroyed before they got any closer.

Tarishma could fire arrows faster than Harry could enchant them though, and by the time she reached her tenth and final enchanted arrow, the demons lay in a sprawl of flesh and blood, burning in their own devil fire and screaming into the night. Harry clearly heard the word Potter gargled half a dozen times. They recognised his magic.

*Whoa... I'd hate to be your enemy,* Ethan laughed.

*You were once,* Harry reminded him, grinning insanely and altering arrows. He was careless at one point and nicked his index finger on one of the sharp tips. Nonetheless he heard the cheers of the other warriors behind him, and saw the success of their battle writhing in pain on the brightly lit road ahead.

*I guess I'm not the only one forgetting things,* Ethan whispered. *I think I was more of the Ethan you knew as a friend then, than the Dark Lord's son.*

"We won, Harry!" Tarishma exclaimed, screaming and crying in joy at the smouldering remains of demon hide upon the road. "We lost no more lives and destroyed thirty of the beasts." She threw her arms around Harry and for an insane moment Harry thought she was attacking him, and almost killed her with a burst of power. His mind caught up with him before that happened though.

Tarishma didn't notice, still crying and laughing at the same time. After a moment, she seemed to remember who Harry was - or rather who she thought he was - and stepped back from the Lord Mage with a bow of forgiveness, but still unable to help the smile that crossed her lips.

"It's been a long day," Harry decided, gazing without emotion at the burning corpses ahead of him, a few hundred feet away. The fire left by his arrows would consume them. That and their own.

"Harry," Tarishma said, still high in euphoria. "Your power is amazing - unmatched I would say. There has never been a mage as powerful as you are!"

"I get that a lot," Harry shrugged. "Do you think anymore of them could come tonight?" he asked.

Tarishma's smile faded, and she glanced back down the road. "It is always possible," she sighed. "And has happened more than once. Harry, we can't ask you--"

"I'll stay," he said. "And get some sleep tomorrow morning."

Tarishma thanked him silently with her eyes, and they both turned back to watch the road. It would be a long night, but if you had the power to do something then you also have the responsibility to do it. Harry knew that, had had it pounded into him.

He couldn't escape who he was.

\*~\*~\*~\*

Ninety-five miles from the village of Kinfriar an army was camped for the night beside the road on a large plain three quarters of a mile wide. Forty odd thousand men and women strong, the mass of tents and small cooking fires littered the plain and the road for thousands of feet in every direction.

The twang of bows cut through the night air, the clash of swordsmen training with their weapons - sharpening their skills - joined them. Smoke rose above the encampment and trailed away through the clear night sky. There was a band of cold cloud to the north though that threatened storms for the army. That was never good for morale. Rain rusted armour and dampened spirits alike.

A larger tent than the others had been raised in the centre of the camp, all others sprawled out in an uneven swath from this one. High domed and cream coloured, presenting a flag bearing a white rose twisted around a sword that fluttered softly in the cool night breeze, the King and his highest advisors spoke of their plans in this tent.

Five men and one woman were inside the tent. Several of them generals, one the High Mage - whose use of the Power was unmatched - the King, of course, and his servants. Seated almost equally on soft wooden chairs, a rose crown marking the King's, setting him higher than that of his fellows, the plan for the demon assault was being criticised again.

"The numbers aren't enough," War Minister Krell spat, "We're going to be slaughtered."

An aging man with a thick moustache and ample beard, the Minister of War had served in many campaigns and fought many battles. He had never seen the like of these demons though, and knew their faith was being tested. He wouldn't shirk that duty, even though it most likely meant death if even a fraction of the demon number was accurate.

"There are only a few outlying towns and villages remaining before the final march to the Endless Plains," another man said, nodding his agreement to Minister Krell. General Dataun Alson addressed himself only to the King, meeting his eyes defiantly - almost insultingly. He had long since mastered the correct level of meekness in these situations though. War and leadership were two parts politics and one part heroism.

"Scouts report that most of these towns have long since been ravished and razed to the ground by the demon hordes," Alson continued. "At the most... we can expect a few hundred swords and bows from those remaining, a good many of them from Kinfriar - if it still stands."

"When will we reach this Kinfriar?" the King - Martrim Deschan - spoke, and all others fell obediently silent, words dying on tongues.

Alson spoke to answer, "It is roughly one hundred miles from our present position, my lord. Three days march... two if we push the men to forty miles a day. They can achieve it over this flat terrain. The road forks towards this village, the main force will continue due north along the Eastway - which does bend but is, ultimately, a faster route. A company will need to be sent to secure the men and woman of this village."

Deschan nodded and ran a hand through his hair, brown but now more than just spotted with grey - streaked. The grey, and the lines on his face, had sprung up over the last month or so, as more and more tales of his kingdom in ruin reached his ears. He had passed through dozens of these border towns that had been utterly ruined. His army had buried thousands who would be avenged, and lost hundreds on their trek north. The demons were powerful - one hundred men had struggled to take down a dozen.

"One hundred more swords may not make much of a difference if it is the last we can expect," Farr Evenson - Commander of the Horse - said. A tall man with a crippled right arm, dark hair and eyes.

"They have experience fighting the demons though, more so than any other here can boast. One month of almost nightly battle will have hardened these people. They can teach the rest of the army what to expect."

That female voice belonged to the High Mage, seated in the second highest seat on the right of the King. His advisor, his right hand. The most powerful woman in the land, some said, and would even be so if the King took a Queen. She was over eighty years old, but the Power preserved her. Not a wrinkle lined her old face, and long silvery hair hung to her waist. Her eyes were sharper than any mans, and saw more as well.

"We will send a party to these people this evening," the King nodded. "Thirty men from your mounted Strikers, Commander Evenson. Ride hard and fast and reach this town before sunrise a day from now."

"Sire," Evenson inclined his head and rose from his seat. Observing formalities, he swore his loyalty to the king before leaving the table of men. A simple oath, offering his life for the good of the kingdom. It was to be expected in times of war. He left the tent, his armour rustling loudly and his sword swinging from its sheathe behind him.

"Determined," the High Mage whispered so only the King could hear.

"Fifteen thousand swordsman, twenty thousand bowmen, ten thousand pikemen and fifteen mages," the King said solemnly. "That is the number we have to face, reportedly, one hundred thousand of

these almost immortal demon spawn... as well as their leader, whose name is unknown but men fear to learn. One in fifty scouts return from the Endless Plains, and each one reports more demons every journey. Dark days ahead...."

"The demons targeted the Tower of Mages specifically," the High Mage said, her voice amplifying sadness throughout the tent. "One hundred trained in the Power have since died... I fear we may be soon defeated, King Deschan. We simply do not have enough Mages."

"We will make our stand nonetheless," the King growled, glancing to the faces of his men and servants. Thoughtful, almost accepting faces met his own. They would die to free the future generations from this inexplicable menace. That is, if there were any future generations....

"I will attend to my duties," the War Minister managed after a moment, bowing and leaving the table after his oath was given. Alson did the same, following Krell, until only the King and the High Mage remained in the tent.

The servants were there as well, standing quietly to the side of his temporary throne waiting for his call. Deschan turned to his most trusted advisor and raised an eyebrow.

"What did you see?" he asked the High Mage.

"Determination," she said, smiling sadly. "Defeat and death hang around the War Minister... his aura is beaten. Krell will die soon, I believe - as will Alson."

The King nodded. A particular talent of the High Mage was that she could see people's auras, and was never wrong. A talent learnt spending a lifetime in the Tower of Mages, which was now nothing more than ash, she interpreted images that flickered around those with decisions to make that affected the world. No more than colours that required deep thought, she had told him once, and had spoken no more of it. The King had relied on this ability more than once during his reign, and it had saved and ended many lives.



"And Evenson?" he asked.

The High Mage's smile deepened, to something resembling happiness. "Determination, as I said. But there is also life and hope surrounding him in hues of gold. He will yet live, whether in a land ravished by demons or ruled by a triumphant King remains unseen. Evenson will survive this coming fight - that is certain."

The King nodded wearily. "Anything else, High Mage?" he asked, nursing an old injury in his side that had healed roughly when he was child. It pained him to take deep breaths.

For the first time that the King could remember he saw the High Mage hesitate. Actually pause before deciding to tell him something! He frowned and she muttered something under her breath before saying:

"I stood upon the ridge a few miles back, my lord," she whispered. "I could see far over the horizon and beyond towards the distant storm clouds in the north."

"What did you see?"

"An-amazing-aura-of-a-magnitude-never-before-known," she gasped fearfully. She spoke quickly, as if fearing to see it.

Fearfully! The King schooled his face carefully to hide his utter shock. The High Mage had never been so open, so lost, out of control of her emotions before. She had seen something that had shaken her and her beliefs to their very core.

Silvery hair wrapped nervously around her smooth fingers, the High Mage's eyes filled with tears. "A normal being has an aura that crawls across their skin, Sire," she said shakily. "That glows perhaps no brighter than a torch, even at the direst of times. Yours was the strongest I had ever seen, and that glow would not even light this tent."

The King shook his head. "And yet you saw an aura of a man who walked miles away?"

"...I did..." she whispered. "Grace help me I beheld it... and sat in awe of Existence."

"What did you see written in it?" the King asked, honestly curious and perhaps a little fearful himself. A man with such an aura would have the power to break worlds, he was sure.

"It was one hundred miles away, as best I could tell," the silver haired mage continued. "It burnt - and still burns - with the fire of the very Sun, of a thousand suns. It cut across the sky to the north, a burst of deep golden light so blinding that I could only gaze upon it for an instant.... in that instant I saw... I saw--"

"What?" Deschan breathed.

"I saw billions of lives extinguished across many worlds," the High Mage wept. "I *felt* them. I saw power... I saw *the* Power in its true form. Life was there, as was love in the smallest of amounts. Time and Destiny, Fate and Choice, Beginning and End... Opposites, my lord. Good and Evil were fighting an eternal struggle through the chords of this man's aura, which touched the very heavens."

"Will he be my enemy, this man, or an ally?" the King asked, his brow furrowed and darkened, new lines almost springing onto his supposedly young face visibly.

"He is above that," the High Mage shivered, speaking through clenched teeth. "He will be what he wants to be. He will do what he wants to do, and thousands will fall into oblivion in his wake. This I See."

"A dangerous man then," the King mused, trying to twist humour into the situation. Truth be told he feared this man already, but would never let that show. "Did you See anything else?"

The High Mage nodded. "On his shoulders rests our world, rests all worlds. He is also tainted by Evil - true Evil... so vile that I was shocked to know that he bore that weight and managed to live. He carries pains that would obliterate a lesser man, or remain on their minds for life... My King, he has forgotten many personal demons that would have destroyed anyone else....

"Yet, despite all of that, this man strives to do what is right - what he believes is right - and I believe nothing short of the hand of God himself could dissuade him from this course."

King Deschan shuddered - he could not help it. "Do you have anything else to add?" he asked, his voice cracking.

"Yes," the High Mage answered quietly. "King Deschan, it will be he who leads your army once we reach the Endless Plains. It will be he that battles the hidden leader of these demons... a creature I believe may be True Evil incarnate. It will be he, my Lord, and nothing can change that."

\*~\*~\*~\*

After spending two days in this small village, Harry began to get itchy feet. His golden scar link still stretched unerringly north, a glittering ribbon marking the destruction eating away existence at its very source.

### *The Ways of Twilight*

He wanted to be on the move, to be back on the road - walking... *no, flying*. He had to remind himself of that almost hourly now, as thoughts and memories continued to slip through his wounded mind. The broom least of all these thoughts. He couldn't recall the night spent guarding the road with Tarishma, nothing beyond her destroying the demons with the modified arrows.

Sitting on a porch out the front of the guard house that stood at the north end of the village along the road, Harry twirled a thornless white rose through his fingers. A white rose that cried tears of light from its blossoming centre. He had called it into existence without realising, and for a time memories became easier to, well, *remember*.

He struggled to recall memories of his friends, of the good times that - supposedly - made all of the others worth it. A grim smile appeared on his face. Harry knew he was stretching that rule to its very limits.

Around him he saw with glazed eyes the town going about its daily life. There were people carrying chickens, walking cows, selling their

products at little wooden stalls. It was a living, breathing window into the past. Swords and crossbows, not guns and bombs. Was that the future of this world? To make the same mistakes his own had, to fight the same futile wars where the victors dug the graves... it wasn't a happy thought, but it was one of the few that remained these days.

Footsteps on the wooden floor behind him alerted Harry to the presence of someone else. From the rustle of armour, and the heaviness of the footfalls - he put his money on Tarishma. He was right. Sitting down on the bench next to him, the young woman offered him a goblet of water which he took gratefully.

"This town owes you more than we could ever repay, Harry," she said once he'd finished with the water.

Harry laughed bitterly. These people owed him nothing, absolutely nothing. It was his own stupidity, his own arrogance, his own mistakes that allowed the demons to break free of their eternity old prison from the inside darkness of the Boundary. He was the reason these people were slowly dying out.

"You don't owe me anything," he croaked, clenching his fists and gazing, once again, into an uncertain future.

Tarishma didn't agree, he could see it on her face, but thankfully she didn't push the issue. "The King's army is within fifty miles now," she said. "Riding hard through the night to reach us soon. We must prepare those we can to join it."

Another battle, Harry mused, another godforsaken fight. It was a pity, really, that all these people were going to die so he could walk through a doorway. Harry didn't want them to die, didn't want to be here. He didn't want a lot of things, and despised all of the responsibility that had been dropped on his shoulders like a mountain... several mountains. He would stand though - with or without the mountains.

*You still going to lead all these people to their deaths then?* Ethan asked, laughing insanely.

*We've all got to die, Harry replied. And if they die now, they would have died helping me to fix it. That's enough - it has to be. They'll live again when I reach the Ways.*

*You willing to bet your soul on that? Because it's damned if you're wrong.*

Harry sighed, gazed with unseeing eyes at the town and at Tarishma, who was smiling at him warmly... she didn't know the monster he could be. *I'm damned anyway, he told Ethan, but then again I can't summon up the strength to care.*

"What's this kind of yours like?" Harry asked absently.

Tarishma was biting her bottom lip, frowning. "Where are you from, Harry?" she asked.

Harry offered her a small smile. "Like I said, a place far from here." He got up and walked away, unaware that he walked in the direction of the golden link.

That following morning, just as dawn broke in the east and the first beams of sunlight stretched upon the battle strewn village of Kinfriar, a group of mounted men road into the village grim faced, bearing a banner with a white rose twisted around a silver sword. The banner of the King.

Harry, Tarishma, and a rough handful of other warriors in the village were just walking down the main cobblestone street, coming back from the limestone road that stretched north, upon which they raised their defence each night. Tired, forgetful, yet still completely aware of his surroundings, Harry noticed the banner above all else first.

*White rose...*

Tarishma gasped, as did the rest of the guard on the silent street. Stirred into action though, she stepped up towards the men on horses regally - a representative of her town, the Mayor's daughter no less. The men and women of the guard followed her, and Harry hung around at the back of the group, wary and curious. Could today be the day he continued north?

"We come in the name of His Majesty King Deschan," bellowed the first man, sitting up straight on his white horse. "We seek the village of Kinfriar," he finished, confident and strong.

"You have found it!" Tarishma exclaimed. "Be welcome, my lord."

The man, who, Harry saw, had a crippled right arm that must make riding difficult, dismounted and with a motion of his left hand, the thirty or so other men did the same. Standing in the faint fog and rising beams of sunlight on that early morning, the two groups spoke.

Dark hair on top of a pair of dark eyes, the crippled-arm man bowed his head shortly towards Tarishma. "I am Commander Evenson, Lord of the Horse and loyal servant of the King."

"Tarishma ne'gala, daughter of Hansi ne'gala, Mayor of Kinfriar," Tarishma curtsied, bobbing her own head as well. After a moment's hesitation, and another one of those lip biting moments that Harry knew meant that Tarishma was coming to a decision, she said, "We offer one hundred and eleven warriors for the king's army... and also one mage...."

The crippled man - Commander Evenson - raised his eyebrows and scanned the crowd behind Tarishma, obviously searching for the mage, of whom he should greet formally - should have greeted first, but that wasn't his fault. His eyes ran over the ragged, tired group of fighters, many wounded and all of a young age. There was even one boy who looked to be still in his teens. He saw no mage.

"Forgive me, Tarishma ne'gala," he said roughly. He had been riding for two days after all, and now this. Had these people gone mad? What would a mage be doing out here, on the borders of the world. For that matter why were none of the proper formalities being fully obeyed? Evenson prided himself on his status, but this was disrespectful. "But I see no mage?"

"He is... he is not--" Tarishma began.

"Hiya," Harry said, stepping forward and offering his hand to the man. "I'm the mage, or so they tell me. Name's Harry."

Evenson paused, looked to the young disrespectful teen and then to Tarishma, his eyes darkening and forehead furrowing into a scowl. "Is this some kind of poor joke?" he asked angrily.

Harry chuckled. "I ask myself that everyday...." he whispered. Louder, he said, "Nope, no joke. I can use the Power, as you fine people refer to magic. Want a demonstration?"

Evenson did not recognise the accent of the young man before him, barely understood his speech at all. It was close to his own, but at times seemed to be worlds apart. Crude, he thought, and entirely not funny. This jest had gone on long enough.

"You will desist--"

Harry threw his hands together and sparks erupted from his palms. Several dozen rose high into the air and then began to spin around the company of men and women in a dazzling array of flashing rainbow colours.

Words fell dead on Evenson's lips, but his scowl remained. "Satisfied?" Harry asked. He knew he was.

"We ride in three hours to the crossroads," Evenson growled, addressing Tarishma but with almost a grudging respect Harry as well. "Have your warriors readied by then. Hard march to meet the army on the bypass to the Endless Plains. Understood?"

Tarishma nodded, bowed again, and waited for Evenson to turn before she did. The crippled hard man stomped back over to his horse and jumped into the saddle expertly, even without the use of one arm.

"That guy's a moron," Harry decided, and turned away himself just before Tarishma. She glanced at him warningly for a moment, then realised Commander Evenson was out of earshot and gave him a small smile. "You know..." he continued, "there's a good chance that every man and woman in this village is going to die if you follow him."

Tarishma glared at him, her face flushing with anger. "Are you suggesting we stay, Harry? Are you suggesting my people are too

weak to fight for a cause we believe in? Are you suggesting, Lord Mage, that we don't belong in this fight? Us, my village, who have fought more demons than any other."

"No," Harry said simply. He thought of the children he had played with the other day, and the good people he had met in this village. "I just don't want to see you dead."

Tarishma softened a bit, but just a bit. "Perhaps, Harry Potter, it would be best if you looked out for your own well being."

To that, Harry could say nothing. What could he say? What could he tell her? He was always the survivor. He had done things, gambled lives, that brought him into mere inches of death.... but he was never taken. He was always the survivor. Prophecy had to be fulfilled, after all. If that still mattered....

He couldn't say anything. He always took the worst, most impossible risks and survived. What was this risk compared to all the others?

*Perhaps the one that does kill you... Ethan sighed. Perhaps the one that dooms us all. Are you willing to continue taking these chances with your life, to fight everyone else's battles, if it means that you ultimately fail to reach the Ways of Twilight? Think about it, because I can think of no bigger gamble than the one you're taking now.*

*I'm not completely helpless, you know, Harry grumbled. I have one or two aces stashed away. Up sleeves, behind ears, under hats... you know. The always underestimate me.*

*Don't always count on that, Potter. Allarius... he... he scares me.*

Harry nodded.

\*~\*~\*~\*

Later that day Harry stood at the front of the procession next to Tarishma, heading east towards the road, he had been told, that cut straight through to the Endless Plains a few hundred miles north. One hundred men and women from Kinfriar, some he knew some he didn't, walked behind him. The thirty mounted messengers as well as



Commander Evenson trotted ahead, swords sheathed but trained eyes casting suspicious glances to every tree and rock along the road.

Not a single chance was being taken.

They had departed the village to a small, silent crowd. The Mayor crying and hugging Tarishma, not embarrassing her by asking her to stay though. It was a sad affair, more so because Harry did not believe that any of them would ever return.

He had been offered a horse, being a mage and all, but had declined. He didn't know if he could stay up on a horse, and didn't want to try. There were also several dozen old and creaky wagons trailing behind him in the long line of humans and horses. They carried supplies - food and weapons, bedding and medicines.

All in all Harry decided it felt good to be on the move again, even if it wasn't in the right direction. His golden link bent and stretched off to the left, disappearing through the trees and heading unerringly north. He was going east, to meet with an army he would probably decimate to achieve his aims.

Something in Harry had died, making it hard not to use these people as pawns in his game. He needed them if he was to have any chance at reaching the Ways of Twilight, needed them to throw at the unbreakable army of demons and give him a shot at Allarius. He needed a distraction, and this one just happened to be human.

The road fell away for another mile beneath his feet before he heard up ahead a deep, rumbling thunder. At first he glanced to the sky, but it was cloudless and the day was turning out quite hot as well. He was glad he only had the basilisk armour and the leather vest on. It left his arms free and cool. The leather pants on the other hand, were a bit hot but manageable.

Glancing ahead he saw the source of the thunder. A row of banners was visible, appearing clearer as their group of one hundred rounded a bend in the road and came to the crossroads. Ahead Harry could see down into a deep valley, one he himself had walked in and closed a gateway between worlds, which was now full of people. Soldiers, warriors, horses... and store wagons.

Harry had only once seen so many people gathered in one place, and that had been at the Quidditch Cup final the year he had been in the Triwizard Tournament. Twenty thousand, more or less, he decided at first glance, but even then more people were appearing over the ridge in the distance, where the south road bent down and disappeared.

It was an army on the move, taking the north road that lay about a quarter of a mile ahead of Harry, stretching to his west - guarded by a forest of silent trees. Mountains stretched that way as well, just visible with snow-capped peaks on the horizon. They would have to be crossed to reach the Endless Plains, he knew.

Before him though, the sea of soldiers swelled and enveloped the road. Banners and armour shining in the sun was almost blinding. He saw the rose wrapped around the sword in a thousand different places.

"White roses," he whispered. Tarishma, on his right, heard him.

"The White Rose of Resdor," she nodded. "A symbol of hope throughout the entire kingdom."

Harry wasn't listening. He wondered, perhaps, if this was just mere coincidence... but then, could he believe in that anymore? He knew that everything was connected, in huge and infinitely small ways. Was it possible he had somehow affected this world, the sword and the rose, or had it affected him? The possibilities were just that, and more impossible than not.

Confused, Harry turned and smiled uncertainly at Tarishma. He turned away with a frown though, always with a frown. Tens of thousands of soldiers marched across the road he stood on, and within all of that was a king whose trust he had to earn, whose army he needed to command.

Plans, strategies, ideas, had all been rolling around in Harry's head since he heard of this army. He didn't want to command it, but they would all be slaughtered if he didn't. Having more experience with these demons, knowing their leader, and having fought one or two battles in his time, Harry was qualified - he supposed he was anyway - to do it. He could sacrifice others... *had* sacrificed others.

Now that he saw the sheer size of this army, he did feel a spark of hope ignite in his heart. It could be done, if it was planned out carefully - if preparations were made.... If Allarius's hate and anger blinded him to all else save Harry. That would be the key. Harry knew that like himself, the demon could destroy this army with a wave of his hand.

But then again he was getting ahead of himself. Right now he was only one among tens of thousands. Then again, if Harry could do one thing it was draw attention to himself. It was only a matter of time.

"Do you see this, Harry!?" Tarishma exclaimed. "The largest army the world has ever known. We will crush the demons!"

Harry forced his face to submit another smile. He was not so optimistic. Glass was half-empty at the moment.

Moving closer to the surging sea of people, Harry found himself calculating numbers, forming plans and tactics as he did. At times he wasn't even aware that he was doing it, and that was perhaps the most terrifying thing. He knew he had become hard, much like steel, but to move pieces of the game so expertly was something new. Did Dumbledore feel this way as he made his decisions?

If he did, Harry felt sorry for the man.

The long lines of the army grew closer as Harry progressed down the road. He couldn't see the head or the tail of the massive force - just the middle bulk of battle-tested soldiers. He didn't notice the crippled Commander falling back to his left either, coming up alongside him.

"You I'll take to the King," he said. "You use the Power, but I doubt you're a Mage. The High Mage will know what to do with you." The man then drew his sword and pointed it at Harry's throat.

As one, the thirty other mounted men, warriors of this world - faces covered in stubble, armour glistening and eyes sharp, drew their own swords and encircled Harry. Tarishma fell into the trap as she was walking next to him.

She drew her own sword, anger and disbelief jumping onto her face. She had seen Harry fight, knew his power. She knew he fought for her people. She also knew that Harry could easily destroy ever single one of these men. She chanced a look at him, and saw his smile.

It was beyond terrifying. Insane... evil... sad... She saw, for a moment, that he was contemplating killing the swordsmen. Tarishma took a step back, uncertain now which side she was on.

Harry showed his teeth and a thousand and one possibilities ran through his mind. He had just been handed an audience with the King, with the commander of this entire army. It couldn't have gone better....

He clenched his fists, wiped his face clean of emotion, and nodded. "Lead on, Commander," he said, no feeling in his voice. "Perhaps after I've spoken to your king you and I can test our swords against one another. That... I would enjoy."

Evenson smiled a cold smile. "You, boy, do not seem to have a sword. I fear I would win such a challenge."

Harry resisted the temptation to call the sword of Gryffindor into existence. Resisted the urge to fight his way out. The less he had to fight the better. There were other ways, there had to be other ways.

Grinning once, he turned and winked at Tarishma. She paled, her sword arm shaking, and smiled uncertainly at him. "Ease up," he told her. "It's going to get worse before it gets better."

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## Chapter 25 - Nothing but Blood, Sweat, and Tears

*Pray for the dead and fight like hell for the living.*

~~Mary Jones

In a thirty horse procession Harry with Tarishma at his side was led along the road towards the amazing bulk of this army. A dozen swords were trained on him from behind, another eighteen blocking escape from every other compass point. Still smiling, Harry conjured half a dozen flashing lights to float around the head of Commander Evenson.

The crippled commander hacked at them with his sword, muttering angrily, but only succeeded in turning six into twelve. After a few minutes in which Harry saw Tarishma pale even further, he killed the lights and winked at Evenson.

The long lines of the army, thousands of men and women, stepped aside as Evenson rode his horse through, taking Harry as his prisoner. He was obviously heading to the King's side, wherever that was, and Harry would thank him for it later.

*Before or after you beat him upside his head?* Ethan asked. *I guess he... underestimated you.*

"They always do," Harry mumbled, rubbing the back of his neck. Lifting his head his mismatched eyes, one pale green one a dazzlingly deep emerald, followed the golden and black scar link off into the distance. It was lost entirely when Harry was moved through the crowd, the swords of the horsemen getting dangerously close.

It was funny, he thought, how at times the entire universe seemed to be against him and at others what he needed was dropped into his lap. Perhaps Evil wasn't as strong as Gryffindor had believed, or that Good still had a bit of fight left in her. Harry didn't know, it didn't help him now, and he wanted to go home.

Ah, home.

*That thought* was constantly on his mind, gnawing away at his defences, his resolve to do what had to be done. Ron... Hermione... Ginny... faces he had all but forgotten over the last few months. They had been forgotten. A hundred fights in a hundred different places had distracted him beyond thoughts of the three people in all of existence he could say he truly loved.

Frowning now, Harry looked down at his hand, to his finger where his ring from Ginny had rested for three months last Christmas. *Christ, it was only one Christmas ago...* The pale band of skin that had once been there had faded, or darkened as it were, erasing any mark of the ring.

He sighed, and eternity sighed with him.

"Harry," Tarishma whispered, her hand on her now sheathed sword hilt. "Tell me, truthfully, are you a Mage?"

Harry looked at her then slowly shook his head. "Not the type of Mage you think I am... was. I'm one of a kind."

"The penalty for impersonating a mage is death!" she exclaimed. "Unlawful use of the Power the same."

"Stronger men than these have tried to kill me...." Harry grumbled, and flashes of the last six years shone through his mind. They were incomplete though, some forgotten. Remembering memories these days was like trying to run up a steep hill with water cupped in your hands - not spilling a drop. All but impossible.

"*Silence!*" hissed Evenson just up ahead, scowling from atop of his white horse. He glared hate at Harry. "Silence or you will be silenced, boy."

Harry snorted, an unwanted memory springing into his mind at Evenson's tirade. "Yes, Snape," he said, saluting the man. "A hundred points, sir? Very well." He dissolved into a fit of laughter.

Tarishma gasped as Evenson's face whitened with rage. She prayed Harry would stop laughing. He did. "Sometimes I fear for your sanity,

Harry Potter," she whispered into his ear a moment later, when they were moving again.

Harry gave her a wink and a lopsided smile. "S'alright," he said. "The voices in my head keep me sane."

The glare of the sun off some of this armour was blinding at points, even when most of it was covered with green cloaks. The white rose banner was raised high above Harry and twisted silver poles as he was led through the crowd of fifty thousand soldiers. He couldn't see where he was going, as most of the men and women were taller than him on horses, and thousands of supply wagons blocked the way as well. Evenson seemed to know where he was heading though.

*Do you ever think about the loyalty you inspire in people, Potter?* the disembodied voice of Ethan Rafe asked. *The sacrifice?*

Harry allowed himself a moment of thought before answering, and zoned out of reality and into his mind, picturing Ethan there - both of them sitting on a hilltop drinking lemonade. He was only vaguely aware of the world around him, enough that he continued to put one foot in front of the other.

*Why do you ask?* he finally replied, sipping his lemonade in his mind's eye.

*Well... from my unique perspective, Harry, I've watched your memories and your interactions with these people. You were barely in Kinfiar a day before Tarishma and her men were willing to die for you!*

*I know...* he sighed. *Oh God, do I know.*

*It is utterly fascinating,* Ethan exclaimed. *You, one life, can change so many others just by blinking! I mean look where it got me. I was your friend and your enemy and now I'm your conscience....*

Harry snorted laughter. *That's not funny....*

Ethan was thoughtfully silent for a moment, and then: *What are you going to do about this Snape clone?*

Harry shrugged. *I'll just see what happens. Perhaps I can wow this king with some flashing lights.*

Up ahead now, Harry could see a row of large tents, silver and tasselled with the rose flag swaying gently in the warm breeze. They were in the process of being taken down and dismantled, packed away for another day's march. Evenson was making a straight line for the largest of these tents, its flaps wide open and people garbed in armour bustling about it.

Fifty feet or so from its entrance, the crippled commander dismounted - showing no sign of his disability - and gestured for Harry to move ahead of him. Three other horsemen did the same, and Tarishma gripped his arm nervously, her face so pale Harry thought she may faint.

It still struck him at times how real these people were.... He had grown up on a world home to six billion humans, and for nearly seventeen years he had believed that was all. Now... now he knew the number was infinite, beyond measure... and every last one of them had a story to tell, a life to lead. They were real; they ate and slept, they loved and lost. He was just one among countless trillions.

And how many had died, how many real lives had been extinguished because just one made the hard choices? But then again, how many people got a chance to fix the past on such a scale? Again, just one among countless trillions.

Shaking his head, collecting his thoughts, Harry felt Evenson's blade resting on top of his leather vest and armour, the point dangerously close to his neck. "Wait here, boy," he grumbled, and entered the tent ahead of Harry. They were left with a guard of three men, all hard eyed and silent.

The ground still seemed to be shaking as Harry stood before the large cream tent, and he gazed with cold eyes at the mass of moving flesh and souls around him. Fifty thousand in all, give or take a few thousand, and he felt the vibrations of their footsteps on the hard earth.

*Will you kill them all?*



"No, they're too real...." he told Ethan.

*Worlds that mirror our own, worlds in the past, worlds that are barren, worlds that are anything and everything. You can't save them all, Potter.*

*Nope... but I'll sure try.*

"Come with me, boy," a voice grunted from behind Harry, and he flashed Evenson his most winning smile. It felt like a grimace, like it always did these days.

Looking at Tarishma and shrugging, Harry followed Evenson into the tent.

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King Deschan packed away his maps and charts, his scrolls and parchments into a chest at the foot of his bed, ready to be loaded onto the wagons. He knew this was a servant's job, but there was something fundamentally satisfying with putting it away himself. He knew where everything was then, where it had gone and no one could be blamed if it were lost.

Servants and soldiers, one and the same, carried furniture and crates out of his tent for the wagons, and the High Mage stood with proud grace off to the side, squinting and holding her hand over her eyes at the tent entrance. Deschan turned and saw sunlight filtering in, but it was not that bright. What could--

"Evenson returns," the High Mage whispered fearfully, and that was enough. If Evenson was back... then he must have brought the man with the aura with him. That was why the silver haired mage was squinting at the tent flaps. It would be blinding to her.

Deschan could not see any of this though, but Evenson did step through the flap a moment later - his sword drawn and face set in a deep scowl. Deschan knew that scowl... someone hadn't been following the set rules and formalities for the noble born. Someone had insulted him, someone had broken the law he abided by and most likely would until his last breath.

"My King," Evenson said, stepping down onto one knee. "I have returned with the warriors of Kinfriar."

"Very well, Commander Evenson," the King nodded. "Any... Any other news?"

The High Mage had turned from the tent flap and now walked over to stand by his side. Her eyes were shielded by what appeared to be a haze of blue mist, floating just above the whites of her eyes. She stared at the Commander and the tent flap beyond without squinting now.

"Grave news, my lord," Evenson said, standing on both feet again, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword embedded a few inches into the earth on the tent ground. "I have captured a... boy, who claims to be a Mage." He glanced with a bow towards the thin and regal High Mage next to the king, and continued. "Whilst he does display use of the Power, he cannot be a true Mage... for one he is--"

"I should like you to retrieve this boy, Commander Evenson, and bring him before us," the High Mage said, sounding like it was the last thing she wanted. The King was inclined to agree. He had a war to fight, after all, and distractions like this could not be tolerated. Not when so much hung in the balance.

Commander Evenson retreated with a grunt, and Deschan and the High Mage barely had time to glance at one another before he returned, bringing with him not one man, but four - and a woman.

King Deschan heard the High Mage gasp, saw her falter and take a step back, but he held his ground. Three of the men were guarding a fourth, swords raised threateningly behind his back. The fourth man - no, boy - did not seem perturbed by this. In fact he was smiling. Deschan didn't know who the woman was, fair and young, but obviously frightened... perhaps not frightened, just nervous. Yes, that fit better.

The boy though, the man with the aura. Deschan could not see it, but he didn't have to. He could *feel* it. The tent pulsed with energy, with life, with power - all emanating from the shorter than average boy. He

was at least a head shorter than Deschan himself, but he just *felt* a lot taller.

"This is the impostor, my lord," Evenson sighed, but he wasn't heard. All eyes were on the boy, who met each gaze with an unblinking stare. Even Deschan couldn't hold it for long, although his eyes were always drawn back to him.

A rough and scraggly stubble lined the cheeks of the boy, his face hard and scarred on more than once place. His eyes were green, one dazzlingly bright, and the other pale and slightly glazed. It didn't look real. Messy jet black hair sat on his head, shooting off at odd angles with the look of never having been groomed. His arms were not that muscular, but he did seem to have an air of physical strength. Deschan picked him as a fighter straight away - one who rarely lost a fight.

A lifetime of scars crisscrossed his visible flesh, mainly his arms and face - although the ones on his face were small, except for the one visible between his fringe. An odd shaped scar... it reminded Deschan of something... no, he could not remember. His eyes though, his eyes were perhaps the most terrifying feature about him. They were mismatched, odd, haunted and dark. They saw beyond the tent and off into events Deschan could scarcely begin to imagine.

*His eyes have seen glimpses of the Truth*, Deschan thought, but wasn't certain what he meant by it. No, was not sure at all. Perhaps he never would be.

"My... my lord?" Evenson said.

Deschan blinked and realised he had been silent for some time. What had he heard? Something about an impostor. The boy had mesmerised him, maybe because he knew of his aura... or... no, too many ifs and maybes.

"Leave us, Commander Evenson," the King said, finally finding his voice and inwardly surprised at how level and commanding he sounded. Not a flake of it rubbed off on the boy though, who still stared with a small smile and unblinking eyes.

Evenson forgot himself for a moment and scowled deeply. "My King, perhaps it would be better if I--"

"Take your men and go," the King snapped. It wouldn't do to see the boy have his authority undermined. He was apparently going to lead his army, when that was a job for the king... weakness could not be shown, not if the boy had power enough to kill them all.

Evenson persisted, even as the boy's smile deepened. "A personal bodyguard might be wise, my I--"

"Do not make me repeat myself a third time, Farr!" Deschan exclaimed. "Leave us!"

His tone left no room for argument and, after glaring hate at the boy, Commander Farr Evenson used his good arm to motion his men to sheathe their weapons and retreat. It was then that the boy spoke for the first time, and his voice was deep - the accent unfamiliar, as was his way of speaking.

\*~\*~\*~\*

"Yeah, take a walk, Farr," Harry said, smiling wryly at the retreating commander. "I'll see you later about some sword practice," he finished with a grin.

Turning back to the others in the tent after the scowling Evenson had left, Harry took a few steps forward towards the man wearing a gilded platinum crown, entwined with roses. He offered his hand to the man.

For a moment Deschan hesitated, but then firmly grasped the youth's hand. His fingers and palm were calloused, rough and warm. He could almost feel the awesome power bubbling beneath his skin. The boy smiled once again.

"Hello, sir," Harry said. "My name is Harry, Harry Potter."

"Potter...." the King managed. "A familiar name, young man. I am King Deschan, Ruler of the Seven Lands, Protector of the Cristenium, and Warrior of the Tower. We are... we are well met on this day."

Harry let go of the King's hand and bowed slightly, in imitation of the bow Tarishma was now doing. She seemed to have regained some colour in her face now that they hadn't been ordered to the execution block, and graciously met with her king.

For the first time Harry noticed the slender silver haired woman standing to the left of the King, and when he met her gaze she turned away sharply, before forcing herself to look back into his eyes. He saw that some sort of magic was floating on top of her eyes, like a pale blue mist. This must be a Mage, a proper one, perhaps the High Mage.

"ello, love," he smiled, cocking his head. "You can use the Power." It wasn't a question, but Harry wasn't sure if these people knew the word 'magic'. If he had ever heard any of them say it, the memory had slipped clean out of his head soon after.

"I am the High Mage of the Tower, Power Embodied and Grace Favoured," she said. Then felt foolish for reciting her titles. They meant nothing to this boy, absolutely nothing. He would have already forgotten them.

"Whoa... you guys are a mouthful," Harry decided, glancing between the King and the High Mage. "But I think I got it. King Deschan, Ruler of the Seven Lands, Protector of the Cristhenium, and Warrior of the Tower... and, High Mage of the Tower, Power Embodied and Grace Favoured. Ah, you see... my memory is not as bad as all that."

"You can... you are a user of the Power?" the High Mage asked. She moved and her dress shimmered as if coated in a thin layer of diamonds. Harry looked at it, and it did actually appear to be coated in diamonds. Well...

He nodded and smiled softly. "I... I use the Power, magic as I call it."

The High Mage straightened and addressed him with her chin held high. "What authority granted you this right?" she asked, her voice level.

"None," Harry replied promptly. "Everyone who can has a right to learn magic," he said strongly, bitterly despising Voldemort and his ideals at that moment. That was one memory he would never forget.

"Do you come before me as an enemy or an ally, Potter?" Deschan asked, placing a strong hand on the crystal sword that hung on his belt. An heirloom of his kingdom - been in the family for centuries, almost a millennium. It had ended war just by its presence.

"I come with something to sell," Harry smiled.

Deschan frowned, and the High Mage hissed under her breath. "And what do you wish to sell me, Harry Potter?" the King asked warily.

Harry continued to smile, baring his teeth. "Victory," was all he said.

Deschan schooled his face not to show any emotions, and gazed with his own unblinking stare into the mismatched eyes before him. "And what is the cost?" he asked.

Still the boy's gaze didn't falter. "Command of your army."

A ball of cold ice developed in the pit of the King's stomach, and he noticed his servants and other men falter as they pretended not to listen as they moved in and out of the tent. He should have expected it, the High Mage had warned him. He feigned ignorance.

"Forgive me," he managed, gritting his teeth. "For I do not understand."

Harry shrugged and raised his palms towards the roof in a gesture of indifference. "I have been fighting these demons harder and longer than you have," he said. "Their leader... I've battled personally. He is a demon in human form, and could destroy your army as easily as blink."

Deschan raised his eyebrows questioningly. "And what do you want my army for, if this demon leader can destroy them as effortlessly as you suggest?"

Harry's face became more serious, and he took a few steps left and then back right, pacing and mumbling. He realised what he was doing and stopped, smiling sheepishly at Tarishma and then the King. In that moment the innocence he had possessed less than eighteen months ago was visible, before it disappeared under the weight of experience.

"Even if Allarius - the demon leader - didn't exist, one hundred thousand demons still stand between you and victory. I doubt half a million men could destroy so many, and you have only fifty thousand."

Sunlight sparkled in through the open tent flaps, and Harry glanced through it carelessly and saw Evenson standing just beyond the flap, once again glaring menacingly. There were many types of people in the world, and it appeared a universal constant was that at least one was a pain in the--

"And what could *you* do to change the odds in our favour?" Deschan asked, mindful he was talking to a boy, not yet a man, who had shown a rough sort of respect and a surprising amount of insolence. "I have many Mages here who are proficient in the Power." He also remembered what the High Mage had Seen. He would give him command of the army, but not without knowing why. "You are just a boy, and know nothing of war."

Even as he said it Deschan didn't believe it. Looking at the many scars that he could see upon the boy was enough of a claim to that. There were also his eyes, his terrifying eyes. And the way he carried himself. It didn't appear he had any weapons - although there was a strange device strapped to his waist in place of a sword. It was silver with a black grip handle. Deschan recognised a weapon, but what sort he couldn't say.

Harry's terrifying eyes hardened into steel. "There are magics that can decimate these demons, and I can give them to your army. I can enchant a single arrow to destroy a demon. I can enchant thousands of them. Your swords I can enchant also, to cut through the demons as if they were paper. I... I can also battle Allarius; I will battle Allarius, and give your army a chance of victory."

"Your claims mean little--" the High Mage began.

"My *claims*," Harry overrode her, "will save your life, and thousands of others if you heed them."

*Harry*, Ethan warned. *I feel...*

*Shut up*, Harry said quickly.

"Proof would be needed, Potter," King Deschan said. "Proof and an oath of loyalty to my throne."

Harry frowned. "I swear oaths to myself and no other," he said. "My help will save your kingdom, and I offer it freely. I will command your army to victory, and I will do it by annihilating every last demon that broke free."

*Potter...* Ethan gasped. *He's--*

Harry felt a buzzing deep in his mind that was vaguely familiar, but he pushed it aside - needing to concentrate on the task at hand.

"Broke free?" the High Mage whispered. "What do you know of these beasts, boy?"

The buzzing increasing, Harry screamed. *Stop it, Ethan!* "I.... the demons... come from the darkness in between worlds. They are soldiers of true Evil, and know nothing but hate and murder...."

*You fool*, Ethan spat, and Harry thought there was a struggle of sorts going on in his head. He felt as if he'd just been punched in the stomach, and stumbled back, swatting at an invisible opponent. *He's here. All--*

Explosions.

Death.

Power.

Blood.



Screams.

Harry's mind became a scarred battlefield as Ethan fought inside of it. Harry felt splinters of pain digging into his mind, burning in his scar. His eyes watered and he fell to his knees before the king.

*Run, Harry, RUN!*

Ethan's screams faded away to nothing, and Harry screamed with him. To the High Mage, as she lessened her guard against his aura, it appeared as if the golden light surrounding the boy faded... and was replaced with something dark. His aura flickered and died, being replaced by Evil.

True Evil.... it was in the tent with them. She screamed and stumbled back over a wooden chair. Hysterically she warded herself and Deschan with the deepest magic she knew. But it wouldn't be enough; Grace save them all *nothing* was enough.

To Tarishma and Deschan, it appeared that Harry was in great pain. Writhing on his knees a band of sweat sprung to life on his forehead, and a drop of clear blood dripped down into his eyebrow and along the bridge of his nose from that odd scar.

*My, my, my, Harry. This place has become a lot more crowded since I was last here,* Allarius cackled. *May I ask who the young man was who so valiantly tried to defend your mind?*

*What did you do to him?* Harry roared, and then out loud. "WHAT DID YOU DO!?"

*Shattered his consciousness to the far reaches of your mind. Snapped him like a twig, partner.*

Harry screamed, both inside and out. *GOD DAMN YOU, ALLARIUS!*

*Your god doesn't exist,* Allarius smiled. *Only I exist now, only you and I.*

Harry gritted his teeth and clenched his fists, bringing his temper into check. He couldn't see anything beyond an explosion of red and

green and white and blue and black.... his eyes flickered through every colour imaginable.

Tarishma felt true fear as Harry stood up before her, drawing the strange silver metal object from the holster on his waist. He swung it around wildly, but she saw his eyes and knew they didn't see her. His skin crackled with that blue power and the ground shook now not with footsteps, but with the Power. Lightning blasted across his eyes and through his hair.

Above all, a deep howling rang out through the tent and wind threw her back into the tent wall. Tarishma saw Evenson run in with his own fire in his eyes, sword raised above his head and an oath on his lips. He brought it down towards Harry's neck.

"NO!" she screamed as the blade fell, and heard the King do the same. The High Mage was chanting her own magic, a deep cloud enveloping her form.

Evenson either didn't hear or chose not to hear. His blade fell, sharp and inline with Harry's exposed neck. The length of metal reflected the blue waves of power, and came down hard with no mercy. The crippled commander was smiling as it fell.

The blade hit home, striking Harry on the neck in a blow that would kill. The blade exploded in a flash of white light, and Evenson was thrown back out of the tent, a shattered sword hilt in his palm. For a moment the shards of the sword floated above Harry and then they fell to the ground.

*Can't have you dying yet, Potter, Allarius whispered. I've got a score to settle, and I will on the Endless Plains.*

*You're the first creature I'm going to truly enjoy killing,* Harry replied, swinging his eyes around fruitlessly in the darkness now, searching... always searching.

The High Mage sensed its presence.... knew the demon was in the tent with them. She knew it was attacking the boy, and she also knew her Power might be able to expel it. *Might....*

She whispered words of Power, and a purple fog spiralled around her form and rose to the point of the tent before shooting out in every direction and slowly falling like snow. It hadn't worked, but the spell did have unintended consequences. The High Mage screamed loud enough to shatter glass as the purple mist descended on Harry, and the King drew his sword with a curse.

She had revealed a nightmare walking under the world of waking.

Standing in front of Harry was a man with fire for eyes, burnt and parched skin that hung off his form. Snakes and vermin encircled his horrifying head... his body a knot of seething muscle and horrid disfigured flesh. Its eyes were glowing, a sword of pain in its hands. A long black blade that could destroy worlds... had destroyed worlds.

There was no other name than Evil, and the High Mage had revealed it. They would die now, oh they would all die. That was clear... nothing could stand against such evil, against Evil itself. No such force to resist existed... nothing, by the Grace nothing. Doomed, they would all burn for this. Just looking upon the creature meant an eternal suffering in the deepest depths of Hell.

Servants and soldiers screamed and fled, most wetting themselves and curling up on the ground where they were. The Demon, Allarius, was visible and he was terrible - beyond frightening. Why try? Nothing could stand against his power. Grace had forsaken them to this fate.

In the tent, the King shook with fear and Tarishma scrunched her hands before her eyes and wept. What was it? *Evil...* her mind whispered. The embodiment of all the wrong in Existence.

Harry couldn't see him, couldn't see anything beyond a slowly descending purple haze. But then his vision burst back into the tent, and Evil stood before him with a blade of darkness. He fired his pistol, his aim as true, and Allarius laughed. The spheres of energy dissipated into his form, making his flesh grow and increasing his power.

"You see me in my true form," the Demon hissed, and the words vibrated so strongly in Harry's mind he thought his head would explode. It very nearly did.

His eyes were burning coals, his face a mass of gaunt decomposing flesh that stank and hung to a visible skull of hate. His body was thin, yet rippled and emanated power on a level that Harry thought he may struggle to meet. The blade in its hand absorbed all light as its influence descended over the tent and stretched out into the moving army outside.

All of a sudden, fifty thousand people stopped walking and turned their heads in the direction of their death. They felt Allarius, and not a single one did not weep.

Harry thought he was beyond fear now, but those familiar gut wrenching feelings clawed at his insides as he took a step back, dropping his useless pistol to the floor. It was met with adrenalin.

"Die now... it makes no difference," the demon hissed. "The Ways are barred to you... Existence is barred to you. The time for hope is over."

*No*, a vague and shaking voice in his mind whispered. *Ethan! It was so weak... so lost. You're his... opp... oppo... OPPOSITE!*

Harry felt a tear fall down from his right eye and felt it mix with the blood from his scar. The sword of Evil was raised before him, a black blade that glittered crimson as it was moved. Allarius was smiling, his face twisting to beyond terrifying and just inconceivable.

And as Evenson did, he dropped the blade towards Harry's skull. The stakes had been changed when he became visible, and now it would end.

For one brief moment now, Existence in its entirety rested on the shoulders of a shattered soul within the mind of an insane hero.

***YOUR SWORD!*** Ethan roared, defiance in his breath, and was not heard again for many years.

Harry dropped to his knees with a cry of fury, raising his right arm as if to block the blade that now had to travel a few inches further. Allarius' eyes were burning with the fires of a thousand suns. And then, Harry smiled, and a glittering shower of sparks fell from his

palm as the blade of Light appeared in his hand, his bruised and bloodied fingers grasping the hilt strongly.

Power streamed up the blade and it burst into blue flame. Less than a second later, Light and Dark met and the tent was blown away high up and over the camp, tearing away from its foundations. A wave of power burst from where the blades met, and anyone within a hundred feet was thrown back hard into the ground.

Deschan, the High Mage, and Tarishma took it the worst, but their armour saved them any broken limbs. Harry didn't notice, and wouldn't have had time to care if he did.

Allarius screamed and Harry joined him. With a cry of defiance similar to Ethan's, Harry rose to his feet and met Evil blow for blow. His mind screamed at him to surrender, and that must be some deception of Allarius', that this was too powerful even for him. He didn't listen - wouldn't listen.

The walking corpse before him snarled and hissed, spat and shrieked. The ground, the very ground, splintered at their feet as both hero and villain fought - neither willing to concede an inch to the other.

Equally matched, and in some part of his mind Harry knew that didn't make sense. He shouldn't be equal to the demon, to True Evil. He should be found less.... yet his power was the same and had the potential to be greater. WHY? Where did this force inside of him come from? How come it was he who could gamble universes?

"We gamble more than that, Harry!" Allarius exclaimed, reading his mind. "We - are - gods!"

"You're insane!" Harry spat. "We're insane! We are nothing but two madmen with enough power to destroy it all."

Allarius moved like lightning, and slashed Harry's arm open viciously, directly across the scar on his arm Wormtail had given him back when he was tied to the tombstone as Voldemort had been reborn. The pain from this wound, which was numb at first, soon made him want to hack the thing off himself.

He screamed in pain and Allarius joined him in pure joy. "Scream enough to wake the dead," Allarius, the demon, Evil said.

Harry's vision went hazy as he was blinded by hurt from the small cut. It wasn't natural. This had to end now or he was done for. His job wasn't finished. Existence would fail if he did, countless trillions would die and remain dead... no... there was nothing to say he couldn't die, nothing to help prevent it either. He was on his own, and his choices shaped everything that ever was and shall be.

Grasping Gryffindor's sword firmly around the hilt, biting back the pain in his arm, Harry pushed his all into the blade. Power, will, strength... the blade shone with the radiance of Twilight, and a fatal strike against Allarius' crimson blade shattered the terrible thing into nothing.

Allarius roared in fury, pain and disbelief. The shattered remains of his sword sizzled and killed the grass upon which they fell. He stepped back as Potter took a step forward, brandishing the blade he was born to wield.

Allarius was no fool. He knew he had no weapon in which to face the wrath of that blade, and the wrath of Potter. Worlds really did tremble in his wake. The thought made Allarius smile. He could do no less, not when facing the only worthy opponent left anywhere. The Creator may have disappeared, died even, but his legacy lived on in this boy. Corruption of the Design had spawned Allarius, but Light had thrown Potter in his path. It had been a brave choice, but ultimately a fool's one.

*Was there even a difference between foolishness and bravery?*

"Shucks, partner," Allarius grinned, and any mind would break at the sight of that grin. Harry's had long since broken though, and he met it with the same unblinking stare he had shown Deschan. "Looks like you win this round. Stay tuned for round two after the commercials, folks."

With a deep laugh that caused thousands surrounding the tent to cry out in fear, Allarius disappeared in a black slit of bent reality. Harry blinked as he disappeared, still holding the glowing sword before him - a barrier against the Dark. It was a long moment before he let it go,

and the sun returned to this world. Fifty thousand soldiers now wept in relief.

Harry scowled and clicked his teeth thoughtfully. With a thought he made the sword disappear, but a shimmering outline hung in the air for a few seconds after its disappearance. His head was thrumming with a thousand different emotions and sensations. It suddenly felt very empty. Ethan was lost... not gone... but neither there. Surprisingly that hurt. The universe seemed to be out to get that boy as much as it was him.

Also, his arm had gone disturbingly cold. He couldn't feel his fingers and the blood had dried against his arm in a long cold river from the freshly opened scar. He looked down at it and saw that his skin had gone nervously pale. Not good....

It was then that Harry noticed everything else around him, and grimaced. He was no longer standing in a tent. There was no tent. A few poles that had been stabbed deep into the earth hung at odd angles, but the canopy was gone. Around him people were crawling to their feet - most crying, some cheering him - those who had seen the fight.

Wagons were upturned and the ground Harry stood upon was cracked and loose beneath his feet. Furniture - chairs, tables, chests and trunks - also lay strewn in a wide radius around the epicentre of the attack, where Harry stood, and he saw Tarishma struggling to get to her feet about ten metres away. She was visibly shaking.

Harry sighed and stepped over to her, holding his cold numb arm at his side. He offered her his warm arm. "Are you okay?" he asked. She had been weeping as well, her hair was dishevelled and there was a nasty cut beneath her left eye. Some object had hit her. Nodding shakily, Tarishma took his hand and managed to stand.

"I'm... I'm scared, Harry," she whispered. "What was that?"

Harry rubbed his cold arm but to no avail. Something was wrong... He shrugged and tried to smile at the young woman before him. He couldn't do it. "That was nobody," he said. "Just a headache."

The army was in chaos now though. Screams mingled with cheers mingled with tears broke the silence of that late morning. A veil of darkness had descended, so deep that it had blotted out the sun. The true horror of what they were riding onwards to fight was laid bare before them, and they had known real fear. Thousands had witnessed the true embodiment of fear, of hate, of pain, of death. They had seen Darkness itself.

But there had also been light.

Tarishma at his side, Harry turned in time to meet King Deschan, the High Mage, Evenson, and half a dozen other grim faced people. They stopped a good twenty feet in front of him, standing well-clear of the sunken circle of ground that Harry had duelled the monster in. Its footsteps could still be seen smouldering in the dirt, as could the pieces of its blade.

Evenson no longer glared, but gazed at Harry with a wary, grudging respect. Others with outright awe. None of them could have done what he did. Youth always was foolhardy, Farr Evenson thought, taking risks no man with maturity would. At times that saved the world, at others got people killed. How many had this one killed with his foolhardiness?

Harry once again tried to smile, but could only quirk the corners of his mouth. "That," he said, his voice carrying over the now eerily silent plain, "was what you're up against. Believe me when I say that Allarius could kill you all with a wave of his hand. You need me... and I need you... to get to him - it."

No one moved, no one scarcely even breathed. Tarishma stood at Harry's side, but everyone else stood before him with care and more than a little fear. Who was this boy who could challenge such a force and expect to live?

*He was dead; he just didn't know it yet.*

Slowly though... oh so slowly. It was always the same, the choice between what is right and what is easy. It never came down to those in power, those who made the decision to send kids into war. The everyday man always made the first move, fought the battle and died



- not for his country or for what was right - but, ultimately, for his friend standing right next to him on those front lines.

A foot soldier, a man carrying a silver sword, moved out of the shaking lines to stand behind Harry, and he was followed by half a dozen others, and they twice as more.

*How do you inspire such loyalty in these people?* Ethan had asked.

God, he didn't know then and he didn't know now.

Demons he had inadvertently set loose had ravished this world, destroyed countless lives... they did not know that, but had seen him duel with death incarnate, and were willing to fight for him. Swear allegiance? Probably not. They were loyal to their king and country... but Harry was an unexpected variable. They all knew that they could not face that evil without him. Its very laugh had sent them screaming to the ground.

So, having only seen him once, hundreds fell in line behind Harry - willing to except him as a leader in this conflict. Harry didn't smile, didn't want to. He thought that the King would be furious, out of control with rage, but the greying man merely looked at Harry and nodded - as if he had expected this. Something in the gaze that passed between him and the High Mage told Harry they might have.

"Command of the battle is yours, Harry Potter," Deschan said, and Evenson spat on the ground before him. He glared once at Harry before trudging away to his men. "You will be my General of Demonic War, and therefore this army is under your leadership."

Harry nodded, his vision blurred and the words he heard slurred and slow. His arm was throbbing, pulsing with pain and evil. He could feel it, like a poison pumping through his bloodstream towards his heart.

*I gotta get out while I'm young*, he thought for some unfathomable reason. Swaying on the spot, he stumbled forward and to his left. He saw Tarishma, she smiled at him with tears in her eyes. He would remember that - that would be a memory that stuck... but there, it was gone.

Laughing but unaware he was doing so, Harry held his bleeding arm with his good hand and fell forward, the laughter dying in his throat.

"HARRY!"

He heard someone scream his name - a woman. Everything was so hazy... *Ginny*, he thought, *is that you? Hermione?* It felt as if someone had put long tendrils of ice inside of his arm. They were cold, he was cold. He was dying.

*Its me, Harry*, an echoing voice resounded in his mind. No longer female, but a vaguely familiar male voice. Who....?

*Who?* he asked, his eyes slowly closing. Dull shapes hung over his form - just dark blurs. Where was he going now? Would there ever be any rest....

*Me.*

*Oh.*

*You're doing well, kid. There is still a long way to go, but if you stay strong it will pass in a heartbeat.*

*Sirius? That you?* Harry asked. *I thought you were dead.*

The voice was silent for a moment that could have been a second or an hour. *Keep your nose clean, Harry*, it finally said.

And then Harry was alone again.

\*~\*~\*~\*

*It seemed darkness was a universal colour for suffering. Light, for less suffering... and occasionally love. Harry sat before an ancient wizard's chessboard, glaring intently at the moving and screaming stone pieces. Swords drawn, the white pieces cried defiance at the black on the other side.*

*Harry pondered his next move. He took the Knight and moved it to intercept a black pawn. The pawn screamed and hissed before falling*

*away into oblivion. His opponent was shrouded in a cloud of darkness - storm clouds - and all that he ever saw of whatever he was playing was a storm cloud hand.*

*His Knight fell to the Black Queen.*

*"A valiant effort, Potter," the dark cloud said. Perhaps it represented his enemies, Harry didn't know. "You have survived longer than expected. I offer you my congratulations."*

*Harry sacrificed a pawn, thinking three moves ahead. The Queen would be his. He did not speak. This was just another dream, after all. Wasn't it?*

*The storm cloud that wavered in and out of human form chuckled, and did not take the bait. Its Bishop moved to check Harry. "You should know by now that even staying three moves ahead isn't enough."*

*Harry nodded and, with a smile, used his remaining Knight to claim the Bishop. Screams of death engulfed the playing piece.*

*"Ultimately, Harry Potter, you will fail. Hope is not in your future, but neither is death...." The Storm moved his Queen to replace the Bishop and claimed Harry's final Knight.*

*Harry sighed. "Don't underestimate me," he told the Storm.*

*The world shook and melted slowly away like water draining down the sink. Harry didn't shake with it and sat calmly as another sprang to life around him. He was seated in a chair by a familiar fire, a cup of hot chocolate grasped in his hands. He was wearing a green woollen jumper with the letter H on the front. A gun was still strapped to his leather pants however. It seemed even in dreams he could not escape that.*

*The fire felt real, the chair comfy and the chocolate sweet. Over his shoulder he saw a twinkling Christmas tree with the refuse of the present opening strewn around its base. He was in the Burrow, he knew, but he was alone.*

*Haunted and mismatched eyes stared into the flickering eternal flames of the silent fire, and Harry forgot to blink.*

*"Is it a dream?" he asked himself, blinking furiously to wet his eyes. They began to water and the cup shook in his hands. "Am I awake?"*

*Soft footsteps echoed on the wooden panelled floor behind him, but Harry didn't turn to meet whoever it was. He was afraid to.*

*Soft footsteps gave way to soft hands stroking his shoulders, and a curtain of auburn hair fell in front of his eyes. He leaned his head backwards, and caught Ginny's eyes with his own.*

*"What have you been up to now, Harry?" she asked, kneading his shoulders hard. "You're all knots!"*

*"I've been out doing the hero thing," he told her. "I've been trying to protect you."*

*Ginny smiled, she looked bemused, and moved around the chair to fall down into his lap. Her weight was nothing but it did drive the pistol hard into his hip. Perhaps a symbolic reminder that he could not have both - choose Ginny or Humanity - and that he could not escape the weapon.*

*"Why?" she asked him now, her hair falling in waves around her perfect face. God, he could die now and be happy forever. "Do you love me?"*

*Harry blinked, and this time a real tear did fall. "I don't remember loving you," he whispered. "But I'd protect you even if it meant moving the earth and everything in it."*

*Ginny playfully slapped his chest. "How cliché, Harry Potter."*

*"Is this real?" he asked, desperation in his voice.*

*"What is real?" Ginny replied.*

*Harry shrugged as Ginny buried her head into the groove between his neck and shoulder. "The Ways of Twilight are real," he finally said.*

*"Then anything and everything you experience is real," Ginny replied.  
"Even this."*

*"Even this?"*

*Ginny looked up at him with her deep brown eyes and smiled. Their lips were only centimetres apart. Harry could feel her warm breath on his face. "Blink, Harry, and your reality can become whatever you want. You have power enough for anything, and in time you'll realise that."*

*Harry sighed and closed his eyes. "Who are you?" he asked.*

*Ginny laughed - it felt and sounded so real as she squirmed on his lap. "A life form," she replied. "One that has never taken interest in the mortal universes before... before you. You're drawing all attention towards you, Harry Potter. Wars are being fought on many plains of existence for and against you. Terrible battles and awesome forces are lining up behind you. Darkness and Light are preparing for the End. And it all revolves around you."*

*Harry stood up and shook off this imitation of Ginny. She... it... fell to the floor and hissed indignation. "Leave me alone," he told her. "I'm not your pawn."*

*It was true, he wasn't.*

*\*~\*~\*~\**

When Harry opened his eyes he did so with a moan and deep, deep sigh. A thin ray of sunlight cut across his line of sight and his mouth felt very dry. His arm also felt heavy. He was on his back, that much he could tell, but he was buggered if he knew where.

The blankets he lay upon felt as if they were moving, as if he were in a carriage. He could hear garbled conversation and the clapping of horses hooves from outside of wherever he was. He tried to sit up, but found himself pushed back down by a pair of hands leaning over his head.

Tarishma smiled down uncertainly at him, easing him back onto the silk fabrics gently. "You are well, Harry Potter," she said.

Harry was chuckling. "You know," he said. "I hoped you were a dream for a moment then, and that I'd wake up to the familiar drapes of Gryffindor Tower."

Tarishma didn't understand a word, but placed a concerned hand on his forehead. "You must have hit your head harder than we thought, Harry," she stated. "You're making less sense than usual."

"What day is it?" he asked.

"The second evening after you succumbed to the poison in your arm. You have been asleep for two and a half days. If it were not for the High Mage you would have died."

Harry struggled to absorb the information, wrestled with it for a moment, and then nodded. "How... what....?"

Tarishma's concerned face darkened and she practically spat; "That monster slashed your arm open with his blade... it was poisoned, drenched in evil the High Mage said. She worked complex Power wards and defences, and I... I stitched your arm whole."

Harry lifted his head and looked down towards his arm. It was pale, and a long line of clean stitches had sown the broken flesh back together. "Couldn't... couldn't the High Mage heal it?" he asked, not wanting to offend. He didn't doubt Tarishma's skill with a needle, but magic was faster and didn't leave him impaired.

She understood though, brushing her hair over her shoulder with a small smile. "She tried, Harry, she tried to overcome that wound for four hours... it... the flesh refused to be healed. I thought nothing could scare me after seeing and feeling that demon, but the High Mage's anger as her Power failed was frightening enough."

*Refused to be healed,* Harry mused.

"There have also been no signs that the flesh is knitting itself whole, Harry," Tarishma whispered. "It is held together with my stitching, but it is not healing. There... I... we can do nothing about that."

Harry sighed. He felt it in his very bones, stretching through his tormented soul. Leaning back he put a tired hand on his forehead and sighed again. "Why me?" he wondered, not for the first time and not for the last. Louder, he spoke to Tarishma, "I doubt it will heal as long as Allarius - the demon - lives, Tarishma," he said.

Tarishma nodded and they both fell silent. For the first time since waking Harry became aware that he wasn't wearing anything beyond his leather pants. His chest was exposed, the basilisk armour lying a few feet away. His pale and scarred upper body was exposed for the world to see - that world being Tarishma - and he didn't think he had it in him to blush anymore, but he did.

"So..." Tarishma said, "how do you feel?"

Harry sat up, waving away her protests to remain lying down. He swung around on the blankets and leaned against the wagon wall - for he was in a wagon - and held his head in his hands as the world spun.

"I'm feeling pretty sorry for myself," he murmured. "And I hate that."

Tarishma was silent again, sitting there in her armour and long green cloak. Her bow was leaning against the wall next to his armour, and Harry wondered if anyone could have foreseen that this was where he would be at this point in his life.

He definitely never saw it coming.

Absent mindedly he ran his fingers gently over the stitching on his arm. Blood had crusted over and dried in the gash, but it wouldn't take much to tear it open again. He sighed once more and dropped his arms uselessly to his side, staring at the opposite wall with glazed eyes.

"You are a mess of scars and hard skin, Harry," Tarishma whispered, touching his shoulder.

Harry blinked and looked down to her hand on his shoulder. She traced the messy tangled flesh of one of the worst physical injuries he had ever suffered. The scar that had been left after Voldemort had driven his blade right through his chest, twisted and pulled. It still pained him on cold nights, and if he over exerted himself. He could feel a dull ache in it now, actually, that he was thinking about it.

"A demon named Voldemort gave me that one," he told her. "Couple of the others are his as well."

"Did you vanquish this demon?" she asked, removing her hands and placing them in her lap.

Running a hand through his hair, Harry laughed. "No, but not through lack of trying. A lot has changed since I last saw him though... He murdered my parents, you know, and my godfather. Hundreds of others... I always attract the psychos."

*Are you there, Ethan?*

"You must rub these herbs into your wound," Tarishma began. "Every few hours."

*Were you... were you ever there?*

"The High Mage will make sure you do," she continued. "And that woman is not one to anger... any more than you already have, that is," she finished with a small smile.

*What is real?*

"We're just over two weeks to the Endless Plains, Harry. Two weeks is all you have in which to shape this army. More and more soldiers fall willing behind you every hour - they saw and heard what you did... you... you're a hero."

Harry wasn't listening; but gazing silently at the thin golden beam streaming out of his forehead. He spotted the black oily marks tarnishing the thing, and knew this was partly Voldemort's mind. It wasn't strong enough to affect him at this distance, but it had torn through all of existence trying.



Incredible.

"We'll be right come the day," he finally said, glancing sideways at Tarishma. "These soldiers saw what they face, and that alone is enough to ensure that each and every one of them will fight to the death to prevent that from ravishing their homes and families."

"And if we are defeated... what then?"

"You won't be," Harry declared. "I won't allow it...."

The wagon came to a tumbling halt and Harry looked around at the door expectantly, resting his head on the palm of his good arm. He heard high footsteps on the stairs that must lead up to the wagon door, and a moment later sunlight streamed in through the doorframe as it was flung open.

Standing regally, her eyes meeting Harry's with a unflinching gaze, the High Mage stood in silk robes of sky blue, her silhouette impressive over the sun high in the sky and behind her. Before her eyes hung a blue mist, and Harry had to wonder about that. It was magic, of that he was sure, but what it did was a mystery.

Taking calm steps, the High Mage entered the small wagon and with a motion of her head told Tarishma to leave. Bowing meekly, Tarishma whispered her goodbye and exited the wagon, her cloak swishing out behind her. The High Mage, silver hair hanging to her waist, waved her hand and the door closed - sealing them in.

"We have stopped to make camp," she informed him, conjuring a chair of air with a wave of her hand. She sat, apparently on nothing, before Harry about six feet away near the door. Harry nodded and rubbed his stubbly cheeks. "How do you feel?"

Harry looked up at her, gazing at her eyes behind the thin blue haze. They were narrow and suspicious. "I've felt worse," he informed her. "But then again I've also felt better."

"There is... poison... in that wound, H-Harry," she whispered. "Poison that even sixteen mages working as one could not remove. I believe it may be slowly killing you."

She thought he may look worried, scared, concerned - anything - but the boy merely nodded in acceptance. What manner of man was he? His face remained calm, pale - but calm. He looked ill, if nothing else.

"What is that blue haze before your eyes?" Harry asked. "If you don't mind telling me."

The long silk robes pooled around the legs of her invisible chair, and the High Mage sniffed as if affronted, but still nodded. "It is a ward against... against your aura."

"My Auror?" Harry frowned. "What....?"

Tsking in disapproval, the proud silver haired woman said, "Your radiance, young man. Your life force. It burns so brightly that if I were to look upon it from so close I would go blind."

Harry was still frowning, and a moment past before he realised what - "Oh! My *aura*... You can see it?"

The High mage bowed her head into a formal nod. "Indeed, it is a gift of the Tower. A use of the Power few can ever master."

"Have you looked at mine?"

Harry actually saw the woman pale in a second. Her flushed rosy red cheeks drained of colour and she stumbled slightly, almost losing concentration on the conjured chair. Meanwhile, Harry had spotted his leather vest hanging on a peg behind a row of shelves and pots. He blinked and it flew into his hands.

Shaking it on, he raised his eyebrows expectantly towards the High Mage. She opened her mouth as if to speak, closed it again and sighed, before finally forming words. "I saw your aura from a great distance - one hundred miles - and I saw war."

"War?" Harry said wryly. "Forgive me for not gasping in surprise...."

"There was also death, and Evil... dark shards of malice and pain. You have wounds that burn day and night, but you no longer feel.

There is... or was... a presence inside of you, a trapped soul - but that presence has weakened."

"I thought that haze stopped you reading my aura," he said. "How can you know Ethan bit the bullet again if looking upon me will blind you?"

Pursing her lips and obviously trying to understand at least one word or concept in what Harry had just said, the woman placed her hands in her lap and peered at him intently from behind the haze. "With your aura, boy, I do not have enough strength in the Power to block completely. Now it is dull, and I see one or two colours and shades of images to interpret. Tell me, what is Darkslayer?"

Harry smiled, showing his teeth. "Darkslayer? Well... what do you know of fighting dark creatures?"

"Demons--"

"No," Harry waved her away. "Not demons. Vampires in this case - and in turn every other dark creature. Creatures that suck the life force from your body, steal your soul, drain your blood. Do you have them in your lands?"

"As memories and in ancient stories, Harry Potter," she whispered. "Such creatures, if they ever existed, haven't for centuries."

"Oh they're real," Harry chuckled darkly. "Darkslayer is what they call me because... because I didn't back down. I'm marked, you see, and I think you can see that mark."

"I see many marks of Dark and Light upon you. The scar upon your forehead is dazzling even with the ward before my eyes, but one is like a tarnish upon silver.... fairly new and tainted."

"That's probably the one," Harry lowered his tired, black ringed eyes to the floor. "Dark creatures, monsters out of stories are drawn to that... and I slay them. What else can you see?" he asked, intrigued. He thought he may have been done with prophecies and prophets for awhile, but it appeared hints of the future and present popped up everywhere.

Sometimes you just have to know where to look.

The High Mage licked her lips in thought, and stared intently up and down Harry's scarred form. "There is no hope in your future," she said without hesitating. "You are going to be fighting for a very long time and nothing can change that."

Again, the boy just nodded - as if he had heard it all before and accepted it a long time ago. "Anything else?" The High Mage barely heard his whisper.

"There are shades of colour and lines in your aura I have never seen before, Harry Potter," she answered. "I am interpreting as best I can with my acquired knowledge... but it is difficult. I see two lives in your future, two lifetimes. You will live once, and then agai-- what is so funny?"

Harry was laughing, rolling around on the floor and holding his stomach. Tears streamed down his face and he chuckled for a full minute before stopping. "Well," he said, "I think we're gonna be okay."

"Might I ask what that was?"

"The Ways of Twilight," Harry smiled, still chuckling under his breath. "You just told me I'm going to make it!"

"I do not understand."

Harry shook his head. "You don't have to. No one has to - I doubt anyone can... but it won't all be for nothing."

The High Mage did not hide her scowl and grabbed Harry's arm roughly to inspect the closely stitched wound, muttering under her breath words he couldn't hear. She sprinkled some herbs from a pot to her left into the stitching, cursing the poison in his veins.

"It will die when he does," Harry informed her. "When I kill Allarius, his poison will be useless."

Suppressing a shudder, the High Mage let go of his arm and met his odd eyes. "The demon..." she whispered. "We are two weeks from

the Plains, boy, what if your body succumbs to the poison before then?"

"Whatever happens happens," Harry decided after giving it a few seconds thought. "At least this way things are a little more interesting. Same old story though - can the hero save the world before he dies from Evil's taint?" Harry finished with a bitter laugh. It was deep, insane... terrifying.

All of a sudden afraid and wary of the boy, the High Mage rose as quickly as she dared - keeping her eyes on Harry Potter. She curtsied - something she had never done to anyone but the King - and made for the door.

"The King requested an audience as soon as you were fit enough," she said upon reaching the door and pulling it open. "Be prompt boy, and remember your place."

Harry watched her go and sensed something of her feelings as she reached the second step down. "Thank you," he called after her and she paused. "Thank you for doing what you could with my arm."

A curt nod was his reply, but he had already forgotten the words of thanks, his mind turning to greater matters - universal matters - that made him feel very small in the grand scheme of things. Then again, the grand scheme of things was falling apart around him, and he seemed to be the only one fighting to prevent that, the only warrior for Light aware of it.

Storm clouds on the distant horizon... yes.

*Two weeks until the Endless Plains.*

*You will live one lifetime, and then another.*

*The Ways of Twilight.*

Chuckling once again, though unaware he was doing so, Harry fell back onto the blankets with a tired sigh. Perhaps just once now he could rest before seeing to everything that needed to be done. Hadn't he earned that? There were weapons to make, plans to forge and

battles to fight now - he had to see the King - but it could wait  
because his eyes were so heavy.

So he closed them, and thankfully did not remember his dreams.

\*~\*~\*~\*

## Chapter 26 - A Storm of Rose Petals

*The salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human meekness, and in human responsibility.*

*~~Havel*

The damp wood crackled and spit as the fire scorched its length and burnt it as fuel. Harry was seated before the small blaze, upon a wooden chair, and his hands were glowing. Beside him a huge pile of wooden arrow shafts, with metal tips, stood faintly glowing in the darkness outside of the ring of fire, and somewhere off in the distance an eagle shrieked into the night.

He was alone, and hadn't seen anyone for hours apart from the servant who brought crate after crate of fresh arrows to be modified, as well as his dinner. It had been four days since the High Mage had visited him in the wagon, two since he had laid out his plans for the Endless Plains, and in that time he had added his power to over seven thousand arrows. Working night and day, in the wagon as the army marched, and on his own without any distractions when it didn't.

It would not be enough, and he would be working long into this night yet.

On his right an equally large pile of arrows were not glowing, as he had yet to infuse them with power, but he wouldn't sleep until every one of them - some eight hundred - were changed. Time wouldn't allow it. He never had enough time - and that was what it always came back to.

Harry was barely using an ounce of his awesome power for this task, and yet his forehead was marred with sweat, his face grim and his jaw tight. A wild light flashed beyond his dim eyes, and despite the warmth of the fire he was shaking slightly. Down on his right arm, a throbbing pain coursed through the bruised and scarred skin over which Tarishma's stitches barely held Allarius' poisoned wound closed.

They had had to be replaced twice, as moving too fast had torn them clean apart. Long red and purple lines were visible stretching out around the wound, and Harry knew it was an infection - of a type never before experienced by anyone - and when the infected veins reached his heart, when then lines finally made it there.... he was dead.

The High Mage and many Healers had tried all they knew to cleanse the wound, and Harry had tried himself as well but it wasn't budging. The medical wards the Mages had placed on the cut were only slowing the poison. Once again, it came down to time.

Ten days or so until the army reached the Endless Plains... could he survive until then, or will the evil poison claim him before that. Time - it always came back to time, and how Harry never had enough of it. If things looked bad, he had already decided to abandon the army and seek out Allarius on his own.

He could travel faster alone... how... he couldn't remember how.... ah, yes, on the broom. That was one memory that continuously tried to slip away. On the broom he could reach the Plains in a day, but what waited there would most likely destroy him without a force large enough to distract it.

One hundred thousand demons - at the least, and scouts occasionally made it back from the Plains reporting that the numbers were increasing by the thousands. It did not bode well for the army, and that is why Harry increased his pace with the arrows. Time was against him, in more ways than one, but he had had worse odds.

Hadn't he? The frightening thing was he could not remember.

Palms still glowing, Harry pressed an arrow tip into the left and, knowing instinctively what he was doing, forced raw magic into the tip - not a lot, as it could melt the metal and make the arrow useless - but enough to drive the point home, so to speak. He placed it carefully into a quiver on the ever-growing pile to his left.

Behind him a thousand fires dotted the valley that the army had camped in this night, and Harry could hear muttered conversation, swords being sharpened and horse's hooves upon the ground. He



forged another arrow... and another, which was, of course, followed promptly by another. Fifteen to a quiver, and then a new one was needed.

Infusing the arrows with magic was second nature to him now, and Harry's mind drifted to others thoughts and plans as he continued his work on the weapons. He thought of the Endless Plains, of the strategies he had decided upon, the sacrifices that would be made.... it would come to swords, he knew that. The demons were relentless, insane and driven on by eternity trapped in darkness, arrows wouldn't stop them all. Tomorrow he would work on the swords of the cavalry, and maybe the quarterstaffs of the foot soldiers.

As the night wore on the pile of arrows on his right dwindled and the one on his left grew. A lance of pain shot up and down his wounded arm with every arrow he modified now, but Harry being Harry he ignored it and moved on defiantly against the wound. He would not let it slow him down, not when so much was riding on this wave.

"Still awake, Harry?" Tarishma asked, appearing out of the darkness to his right, stepping into the light of the fire.

Harry had heard her coming, however quiet she had tried to be. "You on patrol again?" he asked.

Harry supposed he could count Tarishma as a friend of sorts in this world - he had spent more time with her than anyone else, and fought beside her. That forged bonds deeper than years of friendship could. That said, he had scarcely seen her over the last few days. Having had a few nights experience back in Kinfriar with the charged arrows, she had been instructing hundreds of bowmen in their use and potency. What to expect, how powerful they truly were, and how it changed a shot.

"Indeed I am," she sighed, and hunched down on her heels at his side, glancing at the two piles of arrows in their quivers. "How is the wound?"

Harry shrugged and met her eyes. "It's killing me, but what're you gonna do?"

Tarishma frowned and brushed her dark hair back over one shoulder. "What can I do?" she asked, misinterpreting his words.

Harry smiled. "Never mind, I didn't mean you. Just something we say where I come from."

"And where is that? Surrey, you say, but I know of no one who has heard of it. Beyond the seas, perhaps?"

"It doesn't matter," he sighed. "Where... how many days do you reckon it will take us to reach the Plains?"

Tarishma gazed off north into the darkness out there, her brow furrowing in thought. "Possibly nine days, if we push hard, but then that could change with the terrain. I have never been further than the mountains we will reach tomorrow."

Harry nodded. He had heard much the same from others. "I better get back to the arrows," he said after a moment.

Tarishma stared at him for a while, her eyes unreadable, and then nodded and rose. "Take care, Harry," she whispered, disappearing back into the darkness. "Get some rest, you will need it all too soon."

Harry remained silent as she left, twirling an arrow between his faintly glowing hands. He gazed up at the heavens and the silhouettes of the mountains to the north. Unfamiliar stars stretched on for eternity, but he knew that distance didn't mean much anymore. How small everything was and yet how vital each and every world could be....

Trying to remember his life crossing universes, Harry seared his power into more and more arrows. Each one was a small victory for the Light.

\*~\*~\*~\*

### *Three Days Later*

Racked with fever, hungry but unable to keep much food down, Harry allowed Tarishma to press a damp cloth to his forehead and rub special herbs and medicines into his ever-worsening wound. The

deep purple tendrils of poison had spread to just beneath his shoulder and down as far as his forearm in the last few days.

Lying on his back in the wagon, three hundred glowing swords were lined up against the wall - all he had been able to manage today - and the cabin swayed slightly as the horse pulled it through the high mountain track, fifty thousand men and women trailing along behind.

Harry hated feeling so weak, so unable to do anything about it. Pain and injury he could handle, if it happened fast and even if it hurt a lot. But to waste away like this, slowly and quietly as the flame inside of him flickered, was unbearable. He was about ready to.... to what? Somehow reach Allarius sooner, but how... he had had a plan but... what was it?

Groaning in pain and frustration, Harry made a valiant effort to sit up but Tarishma forced him back down roughly, grumbling about men and their pride as she did. Harry choked laughter and her frown turned into a small smile.

"These medicines can only slow the poison, Harry," she sighed. "But it should be enough... hopefully enough to last another week or so. The poison spreads with increasing rapidity every day."

"Has the King ordered the soldiers to do as I asked?" he managed, remembering his plans of the previous evening. He had been summoned to the King's tent as the General for Demonic War, along with Deschan's other top men, and the High Mage. Harry had finally revealed his full plan for the army, and most had accepted it - seeing the small glimmer of hope and victory in his words. Evenson, of course, had argued with him on every single point.

"Yes, Harry," Tarishma whispered, dabbing his forehead gently. "The archers are being equipped as we speak, as are the cavalry and the foot. They're also being split into three separate forces... is that wise, Harry?"

Harry didn't speak for a moment, but just gazed up at the wooden ceiling in deep thought. The scouts, mapmakers, and others who had been to the Endless Plains had given him the layout of the land, and where the demon force was supposed to be - everything hung on that

- and his splitting the army had seemed the best choice. It would mean thousands would die, but at least it wouldn't be tens of thousands.

He had made the choice and it was being done, those deaths would never happen if it all went to plan, the Twilight Plan he called it, saw it in his dreams. His overall plan that stretched beyond this world and reached... in the end... the source of Creation. Harry felt a chill that was unrelated to his sickness.

"It is the only chance for victory," he rasped, placing a hand on his armoured chest. "For true victory."

"Grace willing you are right, Harry," Tarishma whispered.

Harry sighed. "I don't think Grace has a hand in this one. I think this one is all on me."

Tarishma gasped, affronted. "Grace is all around us, Harry, you just have to know where to look."

Harry clicked his teeth thoughtfully, and then sat up fast, before Tarishma could stop him. She didn't know the truth about the Creator - couldn't know - and he couldn't lie around all day. Dizzy, woozy, Harry stumbled to his feet and turned around to Tarishma. She was staring at him sadly, regretfully, but with understanding.

Scarcely aware of what he was doing, Harry twisted his hand and light flared between his fingers of the right. He blinked and a long stemmed white rose rested lightly in his loose grasp. Dew drops sparkled off it and it was thornless. He heard Tarishma sigh, at its beauty, and then watched it bloom into life, the white petals opening and seeming to sing.

"Here," he said, and carefully handed her the rose. "Keep it close, it'll protect you... bring you luck."

"Harry..." Tarishma sighed, lightly touching the marvellous flower. "Harry, it is beyond--"

Harry waved away what she was about to say and headed for the door. "It's part of what keeps the universe alive," he mumbled, not hearing himself. His mind was elsewhere, on the piles of weapons that needed altering, yet words tumbled from his mouth. "What keeps it in balance ... If your Grace is anywhere, it is in those petals."

The wagon was moving as Harry opened the back door, and he sat down on the steps as they wheeled up and around the thin mountain path, supposedly making for a large valley between two of the tallest stone goliaths that stood as a border between the edge of the world and the Endless Plains. For one instant he thought it was raining white flower petals, but that could have just been the air.

The air was thin up here, and Harry could see his breath condense as he breathed. There was thin snow around the rocky road, and frost on the sparse vegetation. Off to his right the mountain fell away a few thousand feet back to the forest area the army had trudged through over the last few days. At the base of the mountains Harry could still see the army rising, and on the road back to the forest as well. He was amongst the first to rise to the high peaks in the wagon.

Remembering what he knew of the months when he left the mirror world of his own, Harry surmised that it was late November perhaps early December. Time had gotten funny for awhile in the last world he had walked through. The days had been longer, perhaps even double normal days and he had lost all track of time.

His vision faded as he gazed down into the forest, and he bit his lip whilst waiting for it to come back. When it did, he gazed down at his bruised and scarred arm, running with infected veins from one end to the other, and wondered what he did to deserve all of this. Why, when you got right down to it, did it always have to be him?

Voldemort was the one word answer. They were opposites. Good and Evil, Light and Dark, Right and Wrong. Everything one did affected the other in someway. It was frustrating.

"It's prophecy," he mumbled.

Harry's mind spun with thoughts and sickness, with best laid plans and fears. He found himself thinking wistfully of the day he would find

himself back in his own world, back on the 20<sup>th</sup> of March 1997. As if he never left.... God, it would be incredible. One hell of a story to tell, but then again it may be better if it never was.

"Should they know?"

He had discovered fundamental truths about the universe, about existence, about creation. Would anyone believe him? Would they believe his story, listen to his adventures... he knew of three people who would, and that was all that mattered in the end. But that day could be years away, a thousand battles away, a lifetime away.

And now, he rubbed his unshaven cheeks with the arm that didn't pain him, hid the one that did inside of his vest, and watched the slow sporadic snowflakes drop silently to the stone ground.

*What was ahead, he didn't know.*

*What was behind, he was forgetting.*

*What was now, he was dying of.*

Harry couldn't help but laugh, and it echoed across the high peaks of the mountains.

\*~\*~\*~\*

*Three Days Later*

Coughing and spluttering, Harry was slumped down in his chair at the elongated table inside of the large tent that belonged to King Deschan. His eyes were bloodshot, his arm purple and burning as if it were on fire. It felt heavy, and he wanted to slump to one side.

Worried glances were cast at him from around the table, from the King and the High Mage, Commanders of the army, and the Ministers for War. They weren't worried about him personally, he thought, just their chances in the battle if he were to die. Harry smiled grimly at each of their stares; he would be around for awhile longer yet.

They were camped in this low valley between two mountains for half of the day, and the next night whilst the army caught up after traversing the narrow mountain paths. As it stood now, thirty thousand men and women rested in the valley, and hundreds more arrived every hour.

"Commander Potter," War Minister Krell grumbled. "Will you be well enough for the conflict in four days time?"

Harry struggled to sit up straight in his seat and did so after a moment. He winked at the old bearded man. "I'll be fine... just you watch."

"There can be no error come the moment of battle," Deschan said. "Harry Potter, do you believe you can defeat Allarius?"

Harry nodded. "You saw me push him back, didn't you? It wasn't the first time... I'll, I'll work something out. The army just has to do its job - make sure the three forces are in position at the specified times."

"We will be there, Harry," the High Mage said, the blue haze shielding her eyes from his aura. Harry didn't want to think about that, it was unnerving. "But we must question your wisdom again. Is it wise not to use the pikemen as defence?"

Harry sighed. They had been over this a dozen times, but they still didn't understand. Their experience in battles was against other men, humans battling humans, it became an entirely different game when the enemy was a demon.

"There can be no defence against these demons," Harry growled, his voice weak though. He coughed and spluttered, sniffing as he did. "They are stronger than your pikemen, and, if we give them the chance, they will wash over any defence you try to mount. We must attack, as quick and as hard as we can. Deal them a blow that will send them reeling - the arrows I've modified will do that."

"Surely some defence is necessary," Evenson growled. "We leave ourselves open to annihilation without a vanguard of soldiers defending our ground."

Harry closed his eyes and uttered a curse. "Listen to me, and listen well," he said, feeling angry and in no mood for this. He was tired and sick damn it, and they had to listen to reason. "You are too weak to defend any position at all. These demons have existed for an eternity; have been imprisoned between universes for that time. They are blinded by hot rage and anger, and have strength enough in that to wash over you. Nothing can be defended against them - the best defence, Commander Evenson, is a strong offence."

The men spent the next twenty minutes arguing back and forth over this, sometimes looking at Harry to say something but he never did. If they didn't get it soon, they never would. He had done all he could to convince them... he hoped they came to the right choice. The High Mage remained silent as well, but then arguing amongst men wasn't her position - she was higher than that.

"Your arrows, Commander Potter," a man who Harry recalled as Alson began, "they can destroy a demon at one hundred paces?"

Harry nodded. "That is why you place the archers up the front of the battle, and as the demons draw near, you have the cavalry and foot run through as the archers move back. With any luck, you'll destroy several tens of thousand with the archers alone, giving me my chance to reach Allarius."

"And what will happen if you kill Allarius?" King Deschan asked.

Harry shrugged. "I don't know."

Deschan raised his palms in frustration. "What do you *believe* will happen?"

Harry managed a small smile. "I *believe* the universe may sigh in relief. I *believe* that the demons may be destroyed - may. And I *believe*, King Deschan, that a lot of bad things may be undone. But that's just what I... believe. What may happen could be a whole lot different."

"How so?" the High Mage asked.



Harry's pale sick face darkened. "Allarius," he began, "is Evil. He is everything wrong with anything, and can something such as that ever be truly destroyed? By killing him, I may deal a devastating blow against the Dark, but it will only be temporary at best."

"If the demon leader is destroyed, the demons themselves will leave our lands?" Harry couldn't remember the name of the man who had spoken, and he shrugged in response.

"A whole lot of ifs and maybes depend on this next battle," he replied. "Whatever happens, happens, and you'll just have to live with it either way."

Thoughtful silence followed these words until, "Do you know why the prison holding the demons failed?" King Deschan asked, directing his question at Harry.

Yes, Harry thought. *Oh God, yes.* "No," he lied. "Only that it did. We have to fight first and ask questions later. For now, just know that my strategy is the only one that will see you through to the end. Don't change it; don't modify it if you *think* you know better. Do as I've said and we have a chance."

\*~\*~\*~\*

*"What are the Ways of Twilight?" he asked.*

*The Guardian shook, with fear and what could have been disbelief. "They... they..." it couldn't say.*

*"Take your time," Harry said neutrally. "Slowly. What are these Ways?"*

*"The throne... the Lost Hand..." the Guardian mumbled, shaking uncontrollably. "The Ways of Twilight are the resting place of the Creator, where all threads of existence meet and where they all were spun from. Anything is possible there, anything at all."*

*Harry nodded. "Sounds like a place to start then," he said pragmatically.*

Harry awoke with a start on the tenth morning since duelling Allarius before fifty thousand people. His arm burnt, had been burning for days, and he was already tired beyond belief. Having given himself four hours sleep last night, he wanted to close his eyes again now and not open them for a year - if again at all.

*"You know nothing, Harry, nothing. The Ways have been lost, unreachable, non existent, since the dawn of the Beginning. Some believe it is where Evil battled the might of the Creator and won... others say it is where the Creator used his might to create Good, at the last minute, and the strength required killed him. They have never been found, never even spoken of so freely until now."*

The purple veins stemming from the infected unhealed wound now clawed down towards the centre of his chest, aiming for his heart. It would all play out over the next few days. For good or ill, fate would be sealed.

Rolling over and coughing up an ugly phlegmy substance that was speckled with seething black growths, Harry winced as the grass to his left burned and died, dissolving as the mucus touched it.

Despite Tarishma's warnings, he had spent the night outside under the stars on their last day within the small mountain range. Another three thousand arrows in their quivers were all piled neatly near the remains of his small fire, glowing faintly and crackling with power. Perhaps they would make all the difference, he didn't know, but would gladly give up a few hours sleep to save a life.

Groaning, his body wracked with fever and aches, Harry managed to stand and went in search of breakfast. It would just be some salted meat and a flavourless porridge, and it was doubtful if he could keep it down or not, but his stomach cried out for food. He was wasting away from this poison, and losing slowly all the muscle mass he had built up over the last year or so. Though that said, without the muscle he may have faded away to nothing days ago - at least this way the poison had something to feed off.

As usual, the soldiers he passed in the camp gave him a wide berth, not meeting his haunted eyes. Some muttered a brief greeting, standard to his position - Commander - and returned to their bowls of

slop. Harry ignored them, didn't know them, wondered if these would be the ones sacrificed....

*Don't think about that, he told himself. None of this will happen... you'll change it.*

Half an hour later and Harry sat on his own back in the small clearing he had slept in last night. Sparse trees and plant life grew in this valley between the two mountains, and off in the distance he could hear a river roaring down the slope. His hands shook as he gingerly swallowed the grey paste, and his stomach churned.

*I should have gone and found him myself, Harry thought. I'm no match for him now - not like this....*

A servant in soldiers garb came and began to remove the dozens of arrow quivers with only a small nod towards Harry. He paid her no notice and threw the rest of his breakfast slop away, his mind jumping from his plans and back to his own world.

Faces and images ran through his mind's eye.

*Ron.*

*Hermione.*

*Ginny.*

*Laughing.*

*Crying.*

*Dying.*

His breathing was ragged from all the fluid on his lungs but for a moment that was all forgotten as he thought, wryly, how life had been so much easier in his fifth year. It hadn't been simple by anyone's standard, but it had been normal compared to all of this.

*How have I come from being angry at detention to battling for Existence?*

*In just over a year.*

The army was packing up for another day's march behind him, one that would take them out of the mountains and give them their first glimpse of the vast, empty plains that marked the edge on every map Harry had seen in this world. What was beyond them wasn't known, what was on them was feared, and it would all play out within the next few days.

He supposed that he would have to meet with the King again tonight and make sure everything had been kept to plan. What he had laid out... *it was the only way, even if thousands paid for it in blood.*

Before all that though, he had a thousand swords that needed modifying. With any luck he could do it lying in the back of the wagon he had called home over the last week or so. With a little more luck Tarishma would be there to stroke his forehead with a damp cloth, and put some herbs into the unsealed black wound.

But then he had placed all his luck in surviving the next few days. Perhaps there wasn't any left for trivialities.

\*~\*~\*~\*

*Two Days Later*

To say the Endless Plains were endless was an understatement Harry wouldn't soon forget. He had never, in all of his travels, seen such a wide open and utterly huge space. It reminded him heavily of the infinity he had floated in within the Stream.

The army descended from the mountains twelve days after the battle between Harry and Allarius. Snow-capped peaks gave way to blooming earth and eventually, after trudging down the slopes and then up out of a deep valley bowl, they had stood above the Plains, and most were in awe at their sheer size.

They really were endless.

Vast empty plains sighing under a purple sky were what a dying and utterly defeated Harry Potter saw on the evening of the twelfth day.

Fifty thousand men and women, thousands of horses and wagons, trailed behind him as the sun slowly set to their left in the west, casting long shadows across the plains.

Harry thought he could see for hundreds of miles, hundreds upon hundreds of miles, and it was all just empty - except for one part, but then that was still to come. Long and wavy reed grass covered the endless miles, severely burnt or destroyed in most parts, but still growing strong on the impossibly large plains.

Harry's eyes flickered over a mass of dark blurs moving what could have been fifty miles away - even more. Distance was impossible to tell on these plains. He knew he was looking upon the demon army - or some of it at least. Thousands upon thousands of enraged beasts with strength enough to tear apart the world.

Dotting the plains were crude wooden crucifixes, and nailed to them were decaying humans and animal hides. Harry took it all in emotionlessly, assessing his battlefield with the hardened eyes of experience. *So this was what happened to most of our scouts, and people from the outlying villages....*

Crows and other carrion birds pecked at the corpses hanging on the wooden crosses for miles around, and dozens of them circled overhead with more coming every minute. Harry wondered if maybe they sensed the coming slaughter... he felt sick to his stomach about it, but maybe that was just the poison that was now millimetres from his heart.

Every breath was painful, agonising. Every movement made him feel sick and want to retch up whatever he had managed to eat. He knew he smelt pretty bad, knew he was wasting away uselessly. He knew that by this time two days from now he would be as dead as those hanging from the crude crosses.

"I don't care," he whispered. "But I can't die...."

He managed a small smile.

"The army is moving away in three parties, Harry," Tarishma came to stand next to him on the rise, her face a mask of sadness as she beheld his ruined form. "Your plan is being put into action... I..."

"Yes?" He continued to stare at the plains, their vastness, their openness... he could walk forever and never find their end....

"I believe this may be the last time we speak together, Harry," she sighed. "I am leaving with the main archers now... you are going with the swordsmen. I want to say goodbye."

Harry remained silent, his eyes watering from the sickness. His hands were shaking but they did so constantly now. Behind him thousands marched to what could be their deaths on his orders, and now he had to say goodbye yet again to another friend.

It certainly did seem, at most times, that existence was doing its best to ensure he was ground down into dust.

"Goodbye, Tarishma," he croaked. "Take care of yourself."

"Farewell, Harry Potter," she said, and gently touched his arm as the wind blew through the two of them, setting her hair flying around her face. "I will pray to the Grace for your survival in the coming battle."

Harry didn't move. "God... your Grace," he began, "doesn't give a damn about me." As if to emphasise this, he coughed up a mouthful of bloody and black mucus that scorched the ground it fell upon.

Tarishma turned and began to walk away, tears in her eyes and anguish on her face. "Faith, Harry," she said as she left. "No matter where you may have come from, faith must be strong in your culture. Why else would you do what is right? Remember your faith, Harry.... One day it may be all you have."

The orange sky faded to purple and red and then finally to the darkest black before Harry limped away from the stone rise. The stars of a foreign and strange world shone down upon him, his aura shone as brightly as the sun during the day, but he was closer to death now than he had ever been.

All around him now soldiers were being organised and moved onto the plains. Crows and ravens circled overhead in the darkness, and if Harry strained his ears hard enough he could hear demon cries on the wind. He knew they knew that they were here.

Limping, coughing and breathing raggedly, Harry spoke quick words with the assembled commanders before the main bulk of the army set out. He would be in the second wave of attack, after the barrage of arrows that would descend upon the demon lines - if they had liens and were not just a mindless rabble - and as the dead piled up he would seek out Allarius.

There was no doubt in Harry's mind that the demon would be hard to find.

It would be a titanic battle - one for the ages, and he did not know if he had the strength for it. Allarius had the power of hate behind him, was infinitely strong and as fast as a viper. Harry, on the other hand, wanted to lie down and die from the pain coursing through his veins.

But anything could happen... anything at all.

By dawn the next morning three separate forces marched across the Endless Plains on the edge of the world under the banner of the King of the Seven Lands. Under the banner of the white rose wrapped around the sword.

One force moved down the centre and was ten thousand soldiers strong. Swordsmen for the most part, at least a third of them were carrying magically enhanced blades courtesy of the dying boy in the front of their lines.

Several miles to their right, twenty thousand archers and pikemen moved closer to the demons that grew nearer with every step they took. It would be them who intercepted the enemy first, followed by Harry's force. Tarishma was in those lines; a white rose of her own wrapped in a silk cloth and tucked into her small pack.

To the far left a final wave of soldiers would reach the demon horde third and last - swordsmen, a few hundred of the remaining archers,

and the cavalry made up this force. Twenty thousand more in all, and the last hope for the living. The King and the High Mage led this force.

All in all, Harry didn't think they could do any better than they had. The ground shook with their coming, and every now and again he could hear battle cries and snatches of song from the braver soldiers amongst the crowd. Some faces he saw were grim, others determined, most were fearful. And rightly so.

The sun was creeping over the plains from the east and had only just reached the far force on Harry's left, and when it did tens of thousands of sets of armour glinted in the sunlight and became a shining beacon of hope for all around. They were all glowing, glowing with the hope of one world.

No matter what happened this day Harry knew he would remember this, riding to war with comrades by his side and protecting his back. Friends, allies, those willing to sacrifice their lives for others. He would remember it, even if he stopped it from ever happening at the Ways.

It happened, after all. In one possible world along one thread of existence within an alternate timeline it happened - was happening right this moment. The gravest way to bring out the best in the human species is to attack them. These demons would learn that today, and beings in higher and lower plains of existence would take notice, and count the mortal humans with more respect than ever before.

In the end the responsibility of that came down upon the shoulders of one boy among fifty thousand of the humans. Harry Potter - he had affected matters and had wars fought in his name that he knew nothing about, and never would know. He was a boy who shaped destiny to his will, and was forever seeking redemption. Although... that... he scarcely remembered now - having sacrificed so much.

Harry himself managed to put one foot in front of the other as they neared the darkest force ever known. He was dressed for war - when wasn't he? - and had tied his rather long shaggy hair back into a small ponytail. His bloodshot eyes screamed defiance in the face of everything, and a glittering sword was strapped to his back with thin



straps of leather. That, above all else, shone in the sunlight with magic.

Judging the distance now that he was down on the Endless Plains, Harry nodded to himself as he put their time at arriving just before sunset. They would reach the demons just before sunset. It was fitting, after all.

They would fight on the Endless Plains whilst the twilight sky hung above them. Thinking about it, Harry decided it could not have happened any other way. Twilight was the only time it would happen. When you got right down to it, twilight was everything.

*Twilight was it all.*

\*~\*~\*~\*

The sun slowly arced its way across the autumn sky, bringing with it early afternoon, and the prospect of war.

Harry felt tired... very tired, and wanted nothing more than to lie down and rest, to fight when he had strength. But there was no more time now, and never would be if he fell to sleep. It was a choice between death and an apocalyptic duel with Evil itself that he wasn't sure he could win.

Shaking his head to clear it, Harry winced as dizziness swept over him in pounding waves. There had been one short stop today about two hours ago for a small lunch, but now they marched for the demon lines with vengeance in their hearts for the burning and killing in their lands. An army in itself were the fifteen mages that rode with the third force, who were here to take revenge against the destruction of their fortress.... Harry couldn't remember if that was why they were here, but it sounded right.

Perhaps ten miles away now, an army of darkness seethed upon the Endless Plains, and Harry could see even at this distance that they were being marshalled into some sort of rough lines. Allarius did have some control; it seemed, over the monsters he had set loose upon the mortal worlds.

Two miles to the right, Harry saw Tarishma's force, the main bulk of archers, about eight miles out from the demon lines. Soon now... it would begin soon. Harry had made sure his plan would still be strong if the demons decided to charge, or if they decided to wait where they were now. He hoped they would charge though, it seemed likely they would.

"They are so many," a soldier to Harry's left whispered. She was carrying a bow that already had an arrow nocked into its groove. "Do we stand any chance?" she finished with a whisper.

Harry turned to look at her, casting a critical commander's bloodshot eye over her. She noticed and her cheeks reddened, looking down as if ashamed. "S'alright," he told her, his voice a harsh croak. "Keep your chin up and fire those arrows as if possessed. You have enough firepower in that quiver to destroy twenty demons. All we ask are those twenty shots... after that you do whatever *you* want to do. Run, fight, hide. No one will think the less of you... because you made a stand, and no one can take that away."

She smiled, it was small and sad but she did. Harry returned his eyes to the darkness upon the plains up ahead... a darkness that was growing with every step he took and the demons became more and more visible. There were thousands upon countless thousands of them. More than one hundred thousand, perhaps one hundred and fifty thousand spread out for miles across the horizon.

Shrieks and cries reached his ears and the ground was shaking from all of the footsteps upon it in so small an area. He could see the main force of the demons... but could he see them all?

The sun had begun its downward arc towards the west by the time Harry had given up counting the monsters. It was disheartening to say the least, and he could see no sign of Allarius. The fight would begin soon - in whatever way the demon had devised - and it would be a slaughter on both sides.

*The best laid plans never last beyond the first five minutes into the battle.*

Harry wondered if that were true - he wondered about a lot of things... like what it would be like to live a normal life, something with homework and girlfriends, worrying about getting a job and impressing a girl. He washed these thoughts away with a snarl - now wasn't the time for fantasy.

The mountains that bordered these plains still stood impressively behind the marching forces - the largest army this world had ever known - and dark storm clouds were descending on their leeward side. By nightfall there may be a strong coating of snow upon the plains, but by nightfall it would all be over.

Another mile brought them closer to the fight.

The ground they walked upon now was burnt and hard. Not wavy reed grass but harsh dirt that was littered with small bones and hunks of rotting flesh. They were definitely in demon country.

Harry knew that Allarius had gathered this force here to destroy him - and only him. These fifty thousand men and women were probably a bonus for his army, but the main reason it was here was to prevent Harry from achieving his goal, whatever that goal had been at the time. Now the demon knew Harry could reverse all that happened, he would be throwing everything he had to make sure that Harry did not see the sunrise again.

Despite the pain, despite the sickness and fatigue, Harry was looking forward to the fight with a ferocity that caused his aura to ignite into a bursting tower of invisible light. Even in his weakened state he planned to wipe the floor with Allarius - to end the madness.

*Someone has to end the madness.*

Four miles perhaps lay between the two forces now, and the cries of hate and fear, of battle lust and anger were all consuming. Harry saw that the archer force on his far right had broken out into a quick trot, many having nocked arrows in their bows. With a cry and a signal to the other commanders in his force, Harry quickened the pace as well.

Twilight was almost upon them now and Harry began to feel a certain eagerness that overwhelmed his sickness for just a few moments. It

was all about to be over, one way or another. After this he would have defeated one of the most powerful beings in Existence, and have a clean run at the Ways of Twilight, and however long it took to get there.

He was excited.

It was then though, just as the sphere of the sun finally touched the edge of the horizon in the west, that chaos erupted onto the plains three miles away. It was then, that Allarius made his move.

*BOOM!*

Heard from miles around and echoing even through the mountains back in the south now, a massive ball of pure raw magic, of the stuff that kept everything anywhere running, the blood of existence, exploded high into the sky above the demon force, and split.

Sparkles of power fell like snow in a whirlwind of magic as the sphere of light, of dark magic, split into a thousand piercing spears of power, each strong enough to rip through several hundred men, and began to rain down upon the army of humans at supersonic speeds.

The lances of hateful white light shot across the plains horizontally as well. It was like a barrage of arrows, but arrows that were pure magic. Allarius was definitely throwing his full weight behind this one.

There was scarcely time for Harry to react, to do anything more than gasp as the beginnings of the twilight sky flared magnificently with ten thousand spears of death. Yet react he did, leaping forward as his own arms blazed to life, a terrifying cry of defiance tearing from his sore throat.

Knowing what he wanted to do but not knowing how, Harry trusted to his magic as his army paused and everything hung on the next second as enough force to destroy them all was hurtling across and down upon their position. Some brave few raised shields against it, but that wasn't nearly enough.

"ALLARIUS!" Harry cried, and threw his fiery arms together with enough force to send a shockwave that knocked the soldiers behind

him off their feet in the hundreds. The shockwave rose like a wave, a shimmering blue wave that sped across the plains in one long winding line, encasing the three forces behind a shield of untold size and strength.

Still screaming, Harry fell to his knees and dug his hands deep into the earth, his magic burning away the ground for that, and poured more and more magic along the curtain that stood thousands of feet high and dozens of miles wide. It was, without a doubt, one of the greatest uses of magic ever.

"POTTER...." a hiss of pure hate and malice reached his ears from across the plains, and although there were no clouds in the mauve sky, lightning crackled and ripped into the plains.

Allarius' spears of power impacted against the shield almost as soon as it was raised. Harry dug his heels in and poured his all into keeping it up and alive, as the power of Evil drove him back into the earth, cracking the ground at his feet and pushing it up behind him.

He screamed his throat to shreds but didn't hear it as a wind of cyclonic measure buffeted him and his shield. Ripples in over a thousand different places appeared on the shimmering blue curtain that stood between fifty thousand men and women and death.

And still the spears of light fell.

Enveloped in pure power, Harry radiated heat so strongly that the parched ground around him combusted into ash and dust. His arms were glowing with the ferocity of the stars, and whilst all of this was happening he could not feel the evil poison that was right now reaching out to clutch his heart.

If he let go of the power he would die.

And what's more he now knew it, being able to feel the poison in his veins with the awesomely heightened senses he possessed from using so much power.

Gritting his teeth, Harry pushed more and more power into his shield and stood up, breaking out into a jog. If the power in the shield had

been flowing like a river before, that river had just become rapids. Harry began to run, keeping his arms forward and his power raised he moved the entire shield with him.

Behind him the soldiers of the army kept pace, but struggled against the wind that didn't seem to affect Harry. At this rate he would reach the demons first, and that would not be good.

*You wanna wrestle, partner,* a voice in Harry's head distracted him for a moment. It was Allarius, of course it was Allarius. At this point in the game who else could it be? All of the other voices were dead.

*I'm coming for you,* Harry sent back. *I'm coming.*

*Then come, boy,* the demon shrieked.

Two miles - maybe a few hundred feet less - separated the two forces when the demons started to run, and the final spears of light broke against Harry's shield. When the last spear did fall from the sky, Harry released the shield with a cry but wisely kept his arms glowing.

Shards of blue crystal light floated to the earth like snow, and gave strength to any of the soldiers who so happened to touch one.

Harry was far from done though. Two could play at this game.

Still running as if all of Hell was set loose behind him - although Harry doubted if he would run from that - he threw his blazing palms together once again, and this time envisioned a huge ball of destructive power. He screamed once again as magic spiralled up from his palms at the speed of light, merging and morphing into a sphere of power one mile high, that cast beams of healing light - almost destroying the orange and purple sky.

With a small smile Harry stopped running, clenched his fists through the power, and... tossed the sphere towards the demons. It was strong enough to wipe away at least a fifth of their force, strong enough to swing the battle in their favour before it had truly begun.

But no - Allarius could not have that.

A beam of darkness shot vertically up through the air to intercept Harry's ball of power. Allarius had cast his magic against Harry's, and when the two struck eardrums burst from the explosion and many were burnt from the searing wave of heat that followed.

Harry growled and then gasped as he beheld the place in the air where his sphere had been last. Night sky seeped in through the tear that the combined magics of both Light and Dark had torn through the fabric of reality. Twilight was still dominant in this world, but for that patch of sky where the magics had collided, an unfamiliar set of stars shone down upon the world. Another layer of reality, another possible world.

More than one man faltered as he beheld that. But the distance was closing fast now, as the demons surged forward with an eternity of hate festering in their hearts. Harry could smell them from here, and it made him want to retch and gag - made him wish he hadn't been born with a sense of smell.

Magic was thick on the air, from only two users. So far this battle, which held over two hundred thousand combatants, had only been fought by Harry and Allarius. That was all about to change - and change devastatingly.

Magic from the massive shield Harry had raised still fell as thickly as any winter thunderstorm or blizzard, and as he pooled his magic for another attack, an amazing thing happened that would stay with him for the rest of his life - however long that would be.

Perhaps subconsciously sensing the will of its master, the falling flakes of magic, some still half a mile high, pulsed with life and in one instant changed from sparkles of raw power and into the petals of a white rose.

Harry laughed out loud as he fired streams of power across the plains towards the demons that were now less than a mile away. Screams, cries, shrieks, bellows of fury and anger reached his ears - but he was willing to bet his magic that he was the only one laughing. Well, Allarius probably was as well - but he was insane....

The sky was littered with the rose petals, some faintly glowing, and there were millions of them - untold millions. The air was thick with them as they slowly floated to the earth. The wind swept them around in spirals, sent them out in every direction for miles. Harry had expected snow later on this evening... but this... never in his wildest dreams.

And his dreams got fairly wild.

And so finally, under twilight broken sky, beneath a blizzard of falling rose petals, Light and Dark met to fight a battle that would decide the fate of Existence, of each and every life to have ever lived and ever would live.

The Boy Who Lived was just another soldier in this fight now, just one more man on the field fighting for what was right. If his task was somewhat harder than that of his fellow soldiers... well so be it.

*If you have the power to destroy the universe, or save it, then you have to take the responsibility for that.*

Harry would, and was.

The far force to Harry's right intercepted the demon horde first, when they were still a quarter of a mile out, and spread apart across the plain as Harry had instructed them to do. From this distance he could see them raise their bows towards the sky, faint crackles of power rising above them from the enchanted arrows.

Moving with a speed that belied their size, the demons met the army fast. *Loose*, Harry thought, a moment before the arrows were fired high into the sky. Another volley followed milliseconds after, and another after that from those behind the next row of archers. And so it went that before the horde reached them, five thousand arrows darkened the twilight sky.

*Five thousand!*

The very earth splintered as the arrows began to hit home. Each one charged with Harry's raw power, each one carrying enough force to rip through the almost impenetrable hide of the demons. Thousands



of demons simply disintegrated as wave after endless wave fell upon their position.

Close enough now the few hundred archers with Harry stopped running and took aim, didn't need to take careful aim as the horde was miles wide and thick. Destruction rained down upon the force, white fire exploding and searing demons in a wide radius from each arrow that hit its target.

Beneath Harry's feet the ground cracked and spider-webbed as if it were a pane of glass struck with a hammer. He ran on unabated, firing lances of power from both arms into the horde.

Despite the heavy losses to the demons, they kept coming with renewed ferocity - a visible mass of decaying flesh, splattered eyes and mismatched limbs. They were hideous, they were nightmares, *they were real.*

*Don't turn away.*

Battle cries rang out from the swordsmen behind Harry, and he heard swords being unsheathed, felt the magic they possessed emanating in waves. If each of the swordsmen behind him could take at least five demons before dying, then victory would be possible... maybe.

The ground was inches thick with petals and more were falling on the wind as Harry, his arms still glowing, reached behind him and pulled the blade of Gryffindor from the leather straps on his back. Magic blasted along the silver blade from his arms and strength enough to wipe away all life began to build in the blade.

Harry screamed and screamed and screamed defiance. So far, so far he had come and it all led to this moment. He could never have imagined this seven years ago, as he let fall silent tears in the cupboard under the stairs, but thinking back he wouldn't have it any other way.

It had all happened for a reason, it was all connected. He would kill Allarius and win a great victory for the ailing Light.

*The war with Voldemort was nothing compared to this, and yet, he would come back to it in time and it would be his greatest challenge.*

Suddenly there was no longer any distance between Harry's army and one hundred thousand raging demons. Thanking Dermas Trask silently for his instruction with the blade, Harry tore into the lines with enough power to slice the bests in two, and knock others a hundred feet away off their mutated legs.

Some power inside of him only directed the magic in the sword at the demons. Blue shockwaves rippled out whenever he made contact with a creature, and these shockwaves were what knocked other charging demons to the ground. The humans behind him also felt the shockwaves pass through them, but it gave them strength and courage - feeling something in Harry's mind. His determination....

Ten thousand men and women followed Harry into the storm of demons amidst a rainfall of white rose petals, and ten thousand men and women showed these creatures that the human race would not simply lie down and die.

"ALLARIUS!" Harry screamed, feeling dizzy now from how long and how much power he had used. "SHOW YOURSELF!" He couldn't let it go though.... if he did the barrier between his heart and the poison would fail.

Working through his sword swings and stances, seeing the demons but just barely, Harry cut a swath of destruction and the rose petals at his feet slowly turned crimson as blood from both the demons and the fallen humans flowed over them. Slowly the sheer mass of creatures were overwhelming the ten thousand soldiers.

It was going to be a slaughter, oh yes; he had led these people to their deaths.

He couldn't care about that though, not now, not now he was in thick of it with them. They would die, he would live on - after all, he was always the survivor.

Gryffindor's ancient blade sang with power as Harry swung it without care but with ultimate skill through the seething mass of hollow flesh

and stinking breath. He himself was covered in the blood of the demons, his clothes burning. Claws and talons tore at him from every angle, some drawing blood others snapping against his armour.

He laughed and destroyed. He was Harry Potter - he could not, did not, lose.

*It's worse than you think... I'm sorry.*

Thousands upon tens of thousands of demons smashed into the humans on Harry's far right, just as those led by King Deschan on the far left entered the battle. It had only been ten minutes since the rose petals had begun to fall, but already the ground was littered with corpses - those of the demons burst into flames as they died, and the fire tore through the layers of rose petals that were now knee deep.

In all of that, in the mass of life and death, petals and flame, Harry continued to slash his way through to the heart of the monsters, a trail of dead and dying in his wake. A thousand men still followed behind him, six thousand lay dead across their part of the field, whilst the remaining three battled for their lives.

Magically enhanced swords gave them at least a fighting chance.

*It's my job to battle fantasy.*

Harry faced down against a mounted monster, similar to the ones he had faced at the fuel station in Scotland so many lost days ago. His blade crackled with lightning and as the beast fell, a plume of rose petals flurried up and swirled on the wind around the fallen foe.

The Boy Who Lived moved through the shower of petals, sword raised in his hands... behind him the gap between himself and the other soldiers was filled with demons, ahead of him more charged... to either side they moved in.

He was on his own now.

\*~\*~\*~\*

Tarishma swung her blade and it struck like lightning as demons fell before her. Thanks to Harry's magic she had lived this long, with several hundred of her fellow archers. They had long since run out of Power arrows but there were still the swords. Still a chance to take down one more before they themselves fell.

"FOR THE WHITE ROSE!" she cried, slashing and narrowly avoiding death from atop of a hideous misshapen creature fashioned after a horse. She dived beneath its spear and thrust upwards with her scimitar - a curved blade with the edge sharp on the convex side.

The thing's 'chest' burst and Tarishma cried out as the blood burnt her exposed skin upon her arms. She fell backwards and into the soft rose petals that she was having to trudge through a moment ago. Disappearing for a moment into a world of white, she bit back on the pain and rose again, blade shining in the twilight.

The mounds of the dead were almost as deep as the rose petals - almost - and Tarishma found herself stumbling through the sea of white and crimson red. Her blade cut through the beasts, cloak and hair swirling around her amongst the petals.

And still the monsters came, wave after wave. She watched her countrymen fall by her side, some protecting her even, others dying as they slew their last demon. The smell was intense, as were the cries.

Battle heat had washed over her the moment she had let fly her first arrow though, and now it was until the death. There was no retreat, no lull in the fight. Tarishma would swing her blade until she could no longer stand.

Across the plains and through the curtain of still falling rose petals, she could see bursts of blue power exploding into the air, moving right through the heart of the demons. *Harry*, she thought and smiled. *If he was still alive then there was still a chance.*

A chance, she thought, for him to defeat the demon commander.

Still gazing at the bursts of power above the screaming demon mass and the fighting human warriors, Tarishma did not notice the creature behind her, or see the other humans shy away in fear at its presence.

The sharp black blade entered her lower back, piercing her light steel armour, and exited the other side just below her breast, a fountain of blood gushing from the dark point of the evil sword.

She gasped, her eyes sparkled with tears, and her scimitar dropped to the floor as a frown of regret creased her young face. Behind her now she could feel the intense evil, coursing now through her veins and draining her of life. Against her will, she felt hot breath on her neck, and glanced over her shoulder into a face that belonged to fantasy... to nightmares.

"A chance...." Allarius hissed and twisted his blade. The sound of bone and cartilage tearing made the demon smile. "Potter never had a chance, fool girl. That which he fights for was doomed at the moment of creation."

Tarishma died, and Allarius thrust her forward off his blade and into the rising pile of rose petals. He scowled and spat on her back, glaring hate at the rose petals.

Ahead of the demon now he could see Potter cutting a swath through his army, destroying hundreds of his servants without a care. The deep heated glare hardened, and his corpse-like face, burnt and twisted beyond any recognition other than it was man-shape, once perhaps, twisted in rage.

*Would nothing stop the boy?* he wondered, the blade raging with power similar to Potter's.

Petals burst into flame and ash as they fell near Allarius, and even his own demons cowered in fear where he walked. Still scowling, his fiery eyes blazing like a furnace, the thin yet unbelievably strong monster strode towards the blazing beacon that was Harry Potter.

"Luck will not see you through this one, boy," he snarled.

\*~\*~\*~\*

Deschan was protected by fifteen mages, three hundred men with enchanted swords, and twenty thousand other soldiers who surged forward around him, meeting the demons with a ferocity that matched the beast's own.

The ground he stood upon was slightly elevated, just a dozen feet or so, but it was enough to see the course of the battle for at least two miles around. The far force that Harry had directed to attack the demons on the right flank was lost to him, and what he could see wasn't heartening.

The sea of demons seemed titanic - huge and moving with, how had Harry put it, *the hate of an eternity imprisoned*. Nevertheless, the King held fast to the plan and moved his brave soldiers forward.

The Power flared across the entire field, for miles around in a hundred different uses. He saw the High Mage leading her mages in breaking the earth beneath the demons feet, saw swords flashing with it, saw a burst of blue power emanating time and time again from the heart of the demon lines.

It was everywhere. It was the greatest battle of the age, one that would be remembered for as long as men lived in these lands.

A group of two thousand broke away from the main pack and Deschan watched as his men spread out and formed the lines they had been trained to do. Arrows were fired and demons exploded. More Power, Power everywhere.

Steeling himself, the King drew his crystal sword, pointed it towards the demons and uttered a silent oath to fight until death. He whispered commands to his generals and they began to move forward to join the front lines. He couldn't ask his soldiers to do something he would not do himself.

Only one stayed behind, and that was Farr Evenson. The man had a disability that would see him dead within this mess in seconds. It seemed the High Mage had been right again when she said that the commander would live through this conflict.

Deschan kicked his horse into a gallop. It was a fine horse, his friend for years. Sometimes a man could get more understanding out of an animal that never spoke than out of a human that never stopped. He loved the beast, loved it like a brother, he supposed. They would ride and die together.

The air stank, men and women died, and Deschan didn't know he was screaming, sword raised before him as he crashed into the lines of those who threatened the people of his kingdom. The crystal sword swung down and, thanks to Harry Potter, cut through the demons as if they were butter.

Deschan smiled and charged on, leading a path that the men behind him could follow. He may die here, his horse may die, but his lands would be free.

\*~\*~\*~\*

*Beneath the mauve sun, twilight hour, when darkness breaks through the sky and petals of the Truth fall like snow, the Darkslayer and Evil will fight a battle of titans.*

*~~ Lost verse of the Darkslayer Prophecy*

Harry stood within a clearing strewn with white rose petals that swirled on the wind and crowned his head. The demons no longer attacked him, but at least ten thousand of the monsters had created a perimeter around him, sealing him in within the very centre of their strength.

He had cut through hundreds of the beasts to reach this point, and he was tired, sick, dizzy... his magic had grown so hot that it was a raging torrent inside of him that he struggled to keep a hold of. Should he lose it, even for an instant, his heart would explode - literally.

The blade of Gryffindor scraped across the ground as he strode around the centre of the circle the demons had sealed him in to. Harry knew that this was at Allarius' command, that the demon was on his way. He hoped he was quick because it was getting harder and harder to keep his power alive.

Vaguely, on the edge of his mind, Harry wondered how the battle was going, and whether or not they were winning. The surge of the demons seemed endless, and yet Harry could see the sparkles of his swords working back towards the south, and knew that at least a few thousand men remained alive.

It hadn't gone to plan, after all. If it had gone to plan only a few thousand would have died... only a few... tens of thousand had died, it was a massacre. But, sadly, it was one that served a purpose.

And that purpose was striding onto the field just as Harry turned towards a gap in the demons that were holding him here.

Allarius had arrived.

*Good evening, Mr. Potter,* its voice hissed inside his head. *I must say, son, you've looked better.*

*So have you,* Harry replied, glaring at the walking corpse... the hideous blight on existence. A creature that had existed in many different forms on many different worlds... but always as evil.

"Shall we dance?" the demon asked, coming to a stop forty feet away. Despite the sounds of battle, the cries of the demons, and the clash of weaponry, Harry heard the demon as if they were standing next to one another.

"You know," Harry replied, raising his blade after swinging it through the petals one last time. "You never made me laugh."

Allarius laughed himself and hundreds of honest lives were extinguished. "You should have heard her scream as I drove my blade through her spine, Potter," it said, and raised a familiar looking black blade. It was identical to the one that had poisoned Harry. It was also dripping with crimson blood. "She begged for her life, begged to serve me at the end. Tarishma, I believe her name was."

Harry didn't blink, but he wished once again that he was dead. So many lives, real lives damn it, that were crushed between his hands. "You'll pay for her life with your own," he replied, voice harder than steel.



As one, the two of them took opposite steps sideways, circling one another and wading through almost waist deep petals. For one moment it seemed like everything was holding its breath, that the two forces would run and strike at each other. But instead, Evil spoke.

"Yes..." Allarius hissed. "She died just like that redhead from your own world - begging to serve me. Ah, the screams, Harry. The screams as I descended upon your precious Hogwarts castle."

Harry faltered, just for a moment, but he did. "Y-You're lying," he managed, but... dear God no... deep down in his mind he knew Allarius had never lied. "YOU'RE LYING."

Allarius' smile told him all he needed to know. "You did not think those you love... loved... could escape my interest, did you, boy? Oh, no, no, no. Ginny Weasley... a lovely young woman, if you don't mind my saying so."

Harry was shaking... with rage, anger, misery, pain, power - he no longer knew and was so far beyond caring it didn't matter. "If you touched her..." he began, and behind him a tendril of his power exploded invisibly and wiped a hundred demons from existence. His anger was absolute.

Allarius' smile deepened, deepened until it reached his ears. He looked monstrous. "She told me all about you... about the..." And here he paused for just a moment, before hitting Harry with a blow that reduced him to tears. "About the diary you bought her... ah, I see you finally believe me."

Harry wept, his hands shook and tears streamed down his face through blood and sweat, grime and dirt. The air around him grew icily cold and any life that had remained in his eyes after all the trials of the years flickered and died.

Allarius moved closer, swinging his blade through the air. "Truly, you did not believe that the cost of your defiance would be cheap, Harry.... It will never be over, not for you. The faces of those lost will follow you even into death. There is no hope anymore, there is no *deus ex machina* for you. You are on your own, and have no one left to fight for."

With a supreme effort, with every ounce of his strength, Harry leashed his anger and pointed it like the muzzle of a gun at Allarius, his sword rising symbolically the same way. Marred with blood, sweat and tears, he raised two mismatched eyes towards his enemy.

"Here is the End Game," he said, and it seemed everything else fell silent. "This one is not for anyone else, but for me. I'll save them all at the Ways of Twilight - do you hear me, demon? I'll save them all... and you, you, Allarius, will be remembered as nothing more but another madmen who tried to destroy me, and failed like the rest."

Allarius ceased moving, and his joy-filled eyes narrowed into angry coals. *Would absolutely nothing break the boy?* He would just have to beat him into oblivion.

"Defiance until the last breath...." Allarius whispered, reading Harry's mind.

"And until the last drop of blood," Harry finished, falling into his most comfortable sword stance.

Universes were about to tremble, worlds were about to fall apart. For some moments, like this one, there are no words that can adequately describe the feelings of the hero, or the hate of the villain.

Needless to say, everything hung on the edge of Harry's sword - on the very tip. The golden beam of his scar link stretched on and out to the north, always towards the Ways of Twilight.

Beyond that... peace.

And now, despite every emotion washing through him, despite all the pain and personal anguish that wracked his very soul, Harry smiled and closed his eyes. This one was not just for him, but for every soul in existence. He could almost feel them all gripping his sword hilt just as tightly as he was.

At that moment, he felt closer to home than he had ever done over the last year.

His power bloomed; he opened his eyes to still falling white rose petals, to Evil incarnate and to the beginning of his fate.

Allarius met his blazing green eyes, and the final game was on.

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## Chapter 27 - And We Became Legends

*Before the face of God we duelled,  
and tore asunder the heavens. God  
himself smiled and waved. A small  
smile... as if He knew a secret  
we did not.*

*~~Bryce*

### *Round 1*

It was an art, really, dancing with swords. There is one point in every wielder's life when the sword ceases to be a tool, and becomes a part of the man - as vital as an arm or a leg, with just as much use. When it is no longer a weapon, but an extension of the soul.

The wielder may hate his weapon with a passion and what he has... must... do with it, but, as with all things, experience increases skill.

Harry waded through waist deep rose petals under an azure washed sky, his hard eyes and mind dedicated to one task, and one task alone. Destroying the creature before him, and getting back to where it all began. Back to March 20<sup>th</sup>, 1997... even those months of his life had been normal compared to this.

*Anything was normal compared to this.* He tried not to laugh, he really did, but his broken sanity betrayed him.

A circle of flame had surrounded Harry and Allarius, even as the snowstorm of rose petals began to thin. Around Harry surged ninety thousand demons, pushing onwards towards the remaining human soldiers who, despite it all, were still twenty thousand strong. Harry's magic had kept them alive, whilst his plans had killed them.

Glittering in the twilight the sword of Godric Gryffindor was an extension of his arm. He could wield it with grace and style, slicing away whatever stood in his path. He tried to remember in that moment who he had been when he kissed Ginny for the first time atop of the Astronomy Tower.

He had not been who he was now, and likely never would be again.

It was a sad thought that, even after all he'd done, it would never be over.

*But maybe it wouldn't be that way, if he could find love again....*

Allarius was still smiling as he hopped from one position to the next, as quickly as lightning or a snake. His blade didn't glitter in the light, but absorbed said light... emitting a pulsing dark cloud that blurred the air the demon swung its blade through. Decaying flesh marred the creature's body, but it was more powerful than anything Harry had yet faced.

"Look at us, Harry," Allarius suddenly cried, raising his arms towards the sky. "Look at what we've done together. Could you imagine an existence where your destiny did not bring you here?"

Harry growled and began to move in across the small clearing they stood upon, guarded at every compass point by thousands upon thousands of rotting demons.

"I'm here because I chose to be here," he whispered, and yet his voice bellowed across the clearing and Allarius raised his sword on guard. "Destiny had nothing to do with it."

Allarius laughed. "How right you are, Harry," it smiled. "Oh my, how right you are...."

"You've destroyed something beautiful of mine," he said, coming to a stop six feet away from the creature. His arms were bursting with power and the blade flared to life. "DEFEND YOURSELF!"

Swinging the sword one handed back over his head and down, Harry didn't expect to hit the creature - and he didn't. He didn't even blink but suddenly Allarius's blade was raised, faster than the eye could follow... faster than light. The two blades met and power surged in such levels that a dome of golden light burst forth from between the two duellers. It faded away just at the edge of the clearing.

"And there I was thinking things had just gotten boring," Allarius mused. "HA!" He flicked his wrist and cut Harry across the stomach - across his armour. The boy stumbled back a moment too late, his dark eyes narrowing further. He had understood... no armour and it would have been game over.

Harry twirled his sword hand over wrist in his right hand, whilst in his left a sphere of power grew to about the size of a baseball. He swung, petals swirling around his form, and threw the sphere at an uncanny speed.

Allarius cried, "BATTER UP!" and used his sword as a club, striking the sphere and deflecting Harry's blade in one deadly move. The sphere split and spiralled away across the plains, the two halves exploding and killing dozens of demons where they landed. "That's two strikes, Harry."

Light metal struck Dark metal as Harry fell into a series of stances and low cut swings that Dermas had taught him. They were second nature, impossible to forget - like flexing his fingers. Each was met with a quicker and deadlier strike. On the last blow he jumped back with a cry, as the very tip of Allarius' blade had nicked his neck. Pain flared but he ignored it.

"Have you been holding out on me, Allarius?" Harry asked, buying time until he could think of something. "You were never this fast in the past."

"You've been fortunate in the past, Potter. A luck that tripped me more than once... but fear not, today I am on form. A battle worthy of your impressive skill."

Harry tilted his head in mock acknowledgement. "You're all heart," he said dryly.

Cruel laughter rang out followed by a blurred series of strikes and blows, each one parried by both combatants - each one radiating power enough to send those nearby to the ground, burying them under a field of rose petals.

It was then that Harry noticed that Allarius's hands were glowing similar to his own, the only difference being that his arms were encased up to the shoulders, and that his magic was now scoldingly hot from being held so long.

He could not hold it much longer.

The ground shook and rose petals shot up like the white swash from a crashing wave as the two titans duelled amongst the dead and dying. Harry's blade was the deepest silver, reflecting the purple of the sky, and it contrasted severely against the hard cold black metal of Allarius's.

Nevertheless though, the two blades met and the ground shook, splintered, shattered. Nearby demons - nearby being over one thousand feet - felt the blows in their bones. Magic preserved Harry and Allarius from these concussions for the most part, but it still began to wear on the Boy Who Lived.

Every strike of the blade, every parry of the swords felt like a hammer blow to his chest. Sparks blazed like a waterfall and his hair burnt, the demon shrieked, it all hung in the balance once again.

It all hung on Harry Potter's shoulders once again. *When hadn't it?*

Minutes passed slowly... or it could have been seconds... hours... years even. Harry didn't know, his mind was blank, his hands a blur and his sword a shining beacon for the light - the tool, the part of him through which he now led this fight. Blows were traded and the power inside both hero and villain grew steadily, and yet sometimes jumped to astronomical levels.

Always rising, never falling.

More minutes passed, and more and more. Every move Harry knew he had duplicated in a hundred different circumstances. He was tired, sick, and could not give an inch even for a second. Allarius was trying his hardest as well, dashing at him through the sea of petals, bending around reality and blinking back and forth across the clearing.... but their speeds remained constant, if not identical.

Hundreds had died on the Endless Plains just from the surges of power ricocheting off of the swords and users. They were, for the most part, demons - so no harm was done.

The land, on the other hand, was seething in turmoil. Magic, raw and unfocused, seeped into the heaving cracks that were springing up in the earth. Torrents of superheated steam burst up through these cracks, and it was only the beginning.

Harry neither saw nor felt any of this, and neither did Allarius. Moving almost faster than the human eye could see, the two of them danced and traded blows so strong that it was doing nothing but destroying the ground upon which they fought.

Bleeding from a dozen or so nicks of the blade, Harry came to the conclusion that he was getting nowhere with the sword, and that it would soon come down to hand to hand - fist to fist... magic to magic.

Even in his enraged calm detached state, Harry shuddered to think of the effect of unleashing their full power on one another would have on this world... perhaps more than this world. It was an option, though.

Allarius had drawn the same conclusion as Harry, and his eyes bulged at the prospect. Finally he would see how powerful the boy was, what he was willing to do and how much more he could sacrifice. *Entire worlds... could he survive watching Earth crumble into dust?*

As one, equals, identical opposing forces, hero and villain stepped back, one panting the other smiling, and lowered their blades. In the same instant the swords disappeared, Harry's into his arm awaiting his call and Allarius's into a fold in reality.

"Great minds think alike," it mused, and made a show of cracking its decomposing neck and gathering its power. When the demon did crack its neck, it bent down to a right angle, before snapping back up with a deep hiss.

"To destroy you, demon," Harry growled. "To destroy you I'm willing to do anything."



Allarius laughed his usual laugh. "Fool! I cannot die for I do not live. How do you kill the undead, Harry?"

Harry smiled grimly. "You drive a stake through its heart."

*Next... came the Power of Existence.*

"Come, Darkslayer, prove your worth."

Harry had been holding onto his power to keep himself alive, struggling to maintain a grasp on the awesome, never before fully tapped, strength that lay within him. Deep reservoirs of his magical potential had never been tapped. Now... now though... none of the regular rules applied.

If the greatest thunderstorm ever blanketed the entire world and the oceans surged up and absorbed all of the land in a torrent of crashing waves and towering walls of water, it would not even approach a drop of the amount of power now swirling through Harry's veins, coursing with unique strength towards his palms.

That same power burst to life in Allarius, and anyone that looked upon them at that moment would have been blinded - even for an instant. They shone with such radiance that the twilight sky faded, and it was mid-morning again.

Harry screamed - or at least he thought he did. *There was so much power... so much potential.* He could do anything now, absolutely anything if he had the will. It clawed at him, bit into his flesh - into his soul - and he continued to scream, now in exhilaration. He felt as if at any moment he would explode - perhaps he would... such power had never before been used by a mortal.

It was a strength, mayhap, to match... the *Creator*.

"Such happy thoughts, Harry," Allarius cried, his voice sounding beyond joy. Even speaking caused waves of power so strong to blast forth from the demon, but they washed over Harry uselessly, and killed everything still alive within five hundred feet.

"If it has to be this way...." Harry whispered so sadly that the magic he held, the dam of pure power, seemed to cry out in anguish as it steadily increased.

He then threw himself at the demon, tearing forward and unleashing his power. He corkscrewed through the air, balling his hand into a fist, and that glowing fist smashed hard into the demon's cheek.

Allarius screamed in pain, stumbled and fell and was back up in less than a second. The earth sank fifty feet downwards, showers of dirt and rock and petals falling, falling, falling. Harry landed on his feet just in time to receive a similar blow from his enemy.

They were fighting on a whole new level now - anything was possible - and the blow that broke Harry's jaw was strong enough to pierce the earth's core... thankfully, this time, it didn't. His own magic shielding him somehow, the force in Allarius' hand was devastating, hurt beyond words, but the main power was deflected upwards and screamed hurtling into the sky, punching through the atmosphere and exploding in a dazzling fireball four hundred miles above the planet.

Four hundred miles... and the shockwave forced thousands upon the Endless Plains to their knees. Not Harry and Allarius though - never them.

And so, a new dance began. Harry's mind was filled with power and the one aim to destroy Allarius - these feelings were reflected in the demon's furnace-like eyes. Nothing else was noticed, and only vaguely Harry wondered where the power he was throwing landed - if Allarius deflected it.

Beneath his feet he felt the ground rumble, could hear a thousand stones shattering in his eardrums. It was beyond terrible, beyond real. Their power was increasing.

Harry and Allarius grappled with one another; at moments rolling around on the ground, fists dealing punches, eyes throwing power and hands stretching towards throats. Sweat lined both their faces, Allarius' was blood red, and still the magic came.

At one point Allarius screamed and made a move to kill. He linked his hands and pummelled Harry in the chest with enough force to level a mountain... and that is just what it did. His own magic still providing protection, the strength of Allarius' blows bounded off his chest and tore through the earth south for over fifty miles - back towards the mountains he had walked through a day ago.

The noise was deafening - it was the end of the world, it had to be - as thousands upon hundreds of thousands of tonnes of rock and dirt were hurled up into the sky, blanketing the sinking sun, raining down upon the land and the strewn contingents of humans and demons battling on the now pockmarked and not so flat Endless Plains.

A rift had appeared from the epicentre of the power - from where Harry and Allarius still stood, still trading blows - and it was over three miles wide. A devastating split in the earth. Where the mountains had stood for millennia at the end of this rift lay a scattered fan of rock and dirt.

Beyond terrible. The humans and demons scattered before this threat, those that still lived, turning tail and wisely running away - just away from the two who could wield such devastating power. No one should possess it, no one - not for any reason.

Harry didn't have time to care about the destruction, and threw his entire weight into the demon that wouldn't die. They rolled on the ground, a seething mess of muscle and power that destroyed anything it touched. Screaming, Harry pressed his blazing hands into the throat of the demon and, as if he were holding a ball of paper, roared and threw the monster up and into the air behind him.

Allarius flew, flew and laughed, high into the sky - flying through debris from the destruction, through rose petals and chunks of flesh. Two miles before he slowed down, the demon arced in the sky and smiled, seeing Potter's light on the ground below. A ground that was rippling and steaming, strewn with destruction. It was beautiful chaos.

Allarius spun and power spiralled around him until he became an invisible blur on the ash filled sky. Like a drill, he tore back down through the air faster than light and dove straight into Potter.

Harry's eyes widened a moment before it happened, but then he was driven a mile into the hard compact earth behind him, a corpse of Evil holding him down. Tonnes upon tonnes of rock and dirt started to fill the mile deep crater. Harry blinked, Apparated, and stood upon the field of petals again. A rain of boulders was still falling, but they burst into dust before the waves of power emanating from him.

Allarius was nowhere to be seen.

Bleeding, battered, bruised and his left eye swelled shut Harry scanned the plains and felt for the power of the demon - he couldn't feel it, anywhere.

"Did I kill him....?" he whispered, chaos falling around him.

The ground cried out and groaned from the strain, the sky was torn to shreds as a hundred different night skies, cloudy skies, and twilight skies from a hundred different worlds looked down upon this source of power.

Harry moved slowly, his senses heightened and eyes sharp. Power still pushed off him in waves and he walked through wasted bodies and unseen allies as he hunted for the demon.

"I couldn't have killed him...." he whispered again, and static crackled around his mouth.

Cyclonic gusts swirled around the field, picking up rose petals by the thousands which brushed passed Harry gently, stroking his bruised and painful face. He smiled, it hurt and the petals blinded him for a moment, and then power enough to destroy the earth erupted behind him.

Harry turned on his heel and saw a beam of pure dark oil surging through the petals towards him, Allarius on the other end. Acting fast, Harry fired a beam of his strength and the two met in the middle.

A ball of searing hot fire exploded from the beams and raced across their length. Harry Apparated to Allarius and punched the demon from his side, sending the foul creature down into a 'bowl' in the ground full

of petals, just as the explosion died out - leaving behind smoky tendrils and charred remains.

Knuckles bleeding, Harry defended himself as Allarius sprung back up and threw his fists through the air. His forearms wanted to shatter under the assault, and after a moment when it almost became too much, Harry fainted to the left and ducked under the demon's arms to the right, delivering a devastating blow to the creature's stomach.

A large chunk of Allarius's flesh tore away under the power of Harry's fist and the demon stumbled back gasping. It glared and with a scream, new flesh knitted over the gushing hole and repaired the damage.

"Shit," Harry breathed, just as the healed creature leapt at him.

Harry linked his hands together and created one powerful fist, and as Allarius shot through the air towards him, he dropped his linked hands and they collided hard with the demon's upper back, driving it down into the ground for several hundred feet.

Not wasting a second, Harry screamed and fired raw power down into the hole after the demon. Dirt and stone were eaten away by the blast and the hole widened as more and more was disintegrated.

Behind him, Allarius silently approached having used his own power to Apparate out of the hole before Potter's magic reached him. He held no strength, masking his presence to the boy's heightened senses, and then struck.

In the blink of an eye power flowed into Allarius' scorched palms and he threw a soccer ball sized amount of energy at the boy's back. Harry turned faster than the blink of an eye though, swinging around his still blazing hands - which cut a rough track through the earth and then came up to intercept the sphere of energy.

Both fighters were forced to their knees from this explosion - a sure sign that they were tiring, and from where their two magics met, an explosion was *sucked* into a gaping hole that had torn open in the thin frayed fabric of reality.

Unable to prevent it as he was linked to his power, Harry's feet left the ground as the rip widened and sucked in his beam. He was thrown through the air and through the tear in space and into whatever new world he was about to destroy.

Allarius cried out in surprise and followed the boy through the hole, leaving behind him a wasteland that had once been lush green plains.

\*~\*~\*~\*

## *Round 2*

Harry flew through the gap and let go of his beam a moment too late, the momentum carrying him further through the air until he smashed into something hard and metallic, his armour and magic absorbing most of the blow so he only winced.

When he struck whatever he struck, a loud whining sound filled the air and he heard many gasps and screams. Opening his eyes and blinking away pain and fatigue, Harry saw a weird jumble of letters and numbers before him,

## *2FCKNFST*

A moment later he fell backwards, out of the metal object and onto hard concrete. It was then that his tired mind caught up with him and he saw the letters as the licence plate for a car. A very expensive looking car, of which he had just sent its engine hurtling up and through its windscreen.

Smiling though, as he got the joke in the licence plate, he managed to jump to his knees and take a quick look around. He was in a city, upon a main road filled with hundreds of people. Skyscrapers hundreds of feet high loomed overhead under an overcast grey sky, and normal people going about their lives stared at him in wonder.

Car horns blared, alarms rang out and people were shouting at him to get out of the road, was he alright, where had he appeared from. Most of these sounds faded away and were replaced by screams of the utmost terror.

Harry turned back the way he had come, just in time to see Allarius step through the gap in reality, leaving that last world, and the gap close behind him. As soon as it did Harry roared in pain as his scar link snapped and then burnt anew off and threw the nearest building - stretching north again.

Not worrying about that though, he gathered his strength and jumped at Allarius, just as dozens of cars on this busy four-lane street slammed on their brakes as people began running across the road without a care, wanting to get away from the breathing corpse and aura of fear that was Allarius.

Harry slammed into the beast and they grappled once again - upon an entirely new, more modern world. No matter, lives could end anywhere.

They went head over heels into the sidewalk which cracked as Allarius cackled and clawed at Harry. People were once again thrown to the ground as the waves of power burst from hero and villain. Lying above the demon, Harry pummelled its chest with punch after punch, driving them both down through the road and into the irrigation and sewerage systems beneath this metropolis.

Beneath the city the fight raged on as epic as ever. Harry fired spheres of light, which Allarius deflected up through the stone above his head and into the city. Above them, Harry could hear screams and screeches of metal on metal - of stone falling and breaking.

Wading in knee deep sewer water the Boy Who Lived could barely stand anymore. His left eye was swelled shut and bloated, his jaw sore and heavily bruised. Blood ran down his face... arms... legs... neck... and beneath his armour the force of the demon's blows had cracked a few ribs. He stood though, would always manage to stand.

"Another world, another crop of souls, Potter," Allarius whispered and his voice was darker than midnight - closer too. "You survived longer than any other..." And now he smiled. "Souls for the taking... catch me if you can."

Harry snarled and leapt forward, just as Allarius... thinned... blurred and turned into a bend in reality, shooting up through the pipe's roof and back out into the city. Harry scowled and Apparated up after him.

Blink.

He stood upon the street he had crashed into a moment ago. The car he had destroyed was still parked where he had left it, only now dozens of others had joined it. Bodies and stone, metal and glass, littered the street. Fire was consuming buildings and pedestrians alike, water mains had burst and were flooding the street. People ran back and forth, knocking one another down in their haste to survive.

Allarius was nowhere to be found.

Harry ran for a few feet passed upturned vehicles and smouldering buildings, more bodies and screaming innocents. He couldn't find the demon, it had once again let go of its power - masking its presence.

*Where does our power come from?* Harry wondered, still holding onto his - and for good reason. Should he let it go for a second, the poison in his veins would kill him as long as Allarius lived. *What gave it to us... and why? We only destroy....*

Adrenalin pumping through his veins alongside the lethal poison, Harry paused as he sensed a threat. Looking to his left as he rounded a crushed car - which was smoking and sparking - two men, wielding two guns took aim against him.

"FREEZE!" the one on the right shouted, a badge on his chest glinting in the sun. "POLICE! GET DOWN ON YOUR KNEES AND PUT YOUR HANDS BEHIND YOUR HEAD!"

Harry laughed, burst with laughter and his power shook the street.

"DO IT!" the other man yelled. "DO IT NOW!"

Unaware that he looked much like the walking dead himself, Harry spared them a quick, pitying glance and said, "Run. Run if you wish to li--"



Both blue shirted officers exploded, showering Harry with their blood and bone, their flesh and organs. He didn't even flinch, and as Allarius came into view as the blood fell and smiled, he grimaced as the demon disappeared with a swish of its cloak.

Harry really wished he knew how the demon travelled through bends in reality.

Trying to get his mind around it, he supposed it was something like slipping into a previous layer of the canvas that was this reality. Canvas was made up of threaded together layers, and it did seem possible that you could slip behind the first layer - the top layer, the one he stood in now - and step into an in between version of the world you stood upon. You couldn't be seen, but you could see everything else. You couldn't change anything, but you had surprise on you side.

Yes, it would be useful to know.

Trying to glance in every direction at once, not knowing when or where the next attack was coming from, Harry took deep breaths to calm himself and to help wash away the fatigue he was feeling.

The city street burned around him, roiled in the intense heat of the magical flames. It had become a crematorium.

Harry knew his magic had saved his life a hundred times over in this fight already. It had made him almost invincible to harm, save attacks from Allarius, and he felt exhilarated - slightly drunk on the power. It flowed in every single vein in his body, replacing blood even and cracking the concrete sidewalk beneath his feet.

He hoped and prayed that he could hold onto it for just a little bit longer, just as long as was necessary.

For the first time Harry noticed lightning crackling across the sky, and then realised it hadn't been there when he had first entered this world a quarter of an hour ago. He and Allarius had created it with their presence. Everything really was epic.

"Show yourself," Harry muttered, gritting his teeth against the swelling pain in his face. It had been reduced to a bloody mess and he couldn't see out of his left eye. "SHOW YOURSELF!"

Power flared to life behind him and Harry spun in the blink of an eye--

And received a hammer blow to the chest so hard that he was thrown backwards off his feet and through the side of the nearest skyscraper, tearing through concrete, plaster, wood and metal girders. He flew upwards through the building and ended up shooting out the other side in a shower of glass and debris on a new street completely unaffected by the destruction.

His magic absorbing the best of the blows, Harry fell hard down onto the road - crushing several cars and - of course - cracking the gravel road. A whole new wave of screams washed across these innocent people, who today witnessed the greatest battle in Existence.

Across all the worlds and all the planes of existence, through every universe to every creature - man or energy, alien or animal - to all the wars being fought for Harry or Allarius... nothing compared to the power in this one.

Harry rose with a scream of fury and unleashed his power back through the skyscraper he had been blasted through. Streaming white light, forty feet wide and twenty feet high burst and grew from his palms, cutting through the building and back to the parallel street he had stood upon mere seconds ago.

"DIE!" he screamed, and glass panes hundreds of feet above his head on either side of the road shattered and rained down as dozens of dangerous crystals.

The beam cut through the foundations of the building, destroying its support and, as Harry realised this, he heard Allarius laugh triumphantly.

Cursing himself and damning his soul even further, Harry Apparated away as the building, as high as the sky, began to crumble and fall upon the grid-like roads and smaller structures of the city.

The air was filled with screams, explosions, screeches... the air was filled with destruction.

Harry stood atop of a building half a mile away from the one he had just destroyed, and saw it topple and fall - obeying the law of gravity to the letter. A cloud of dust shot up high into the air, and lightning crackled around the fallen building. Hundreds died.

Once again, Allarius had masked his power.

*The price of your game is high - too high.*

Harry recalled Ethan's words clearly at that moment - as his nerve threatened to break. When did it become too much? "It has to be worth it...." he whispered. "It *will* be worth it."

High above the ground on this flat rooftop, Harry turned as he felt the demon step onto it behind him. Sure enough, Allarius - holding his sword again - appeared as if stepping out from behind an invisible wall. His burning eyes shone with amusement.

Harry clenched his fists and his knuckles cracked.

"They're all talking about us now, Harry. Watching us," Allarius cackled. "The Guardians, Good and Evil... we have become legends in the last hour. Can't you feel it? All life is watching us battle."

Harry spat a black bloody mess upon the roof at his feet. "You talk to much, demon," he stated. "Why can't I kill you?"

Allarius cackled, swinging his sword lazily through the air. Around him this city had become chaos. "Oh, Potter, you are simply not trying hard enough!"

*See heaven in a wildflower.*

Harry twitched and, remembering the old days perhaps, twitched his right wrist and his wand - strapped in the holster - flicked up and into his waiting hand.

"*Vestic*," he cried, and a blazing purple crescent blade of power burst from his seldom used wand, screaming through the air leaving turbulence in its wake to strike the demon on its disfigured chest.

The light hit home, Harry smiled and so did Allarius. Harry's smile faded as the light seeped into the demon, and it cackled.

"The Dark Arts," Allarius mused. "You know I was there when they were created... I am part of them, after all."

Harry swore - he had helped the demon, given him strength - he returned his wand to the holster.

"Right then," he said, calling back the sword of Gryffindor. "Let's try this again."

And they duelled.

All was crumbling away beneath them, light was being swallowed by dark - but putting up one hell of a fight before it died. Harry used the blade as if all the talent of all the blade masters in all the worlds had been given to him - his skill magnified a million fold by the amount of power he was still holding - always holding.

Allarius' smile slowly faded as the demon found itself on the defensive, edging closer and closer to the edge of the shaking building they fought upon. Its smile turned to a frown and then finally shrieks and hisses of frustration as it struggled to meet Harry's mythic sword with its own.

Harry's mind was a blur of stances and flurries, moves and counter moves he didn't remember knowing. His face hardened into determination as he pushed Allarius back, further back. He would win - he would win. He had to win.

Everything hung in the balance - beings of Light throughout Existence screamed him on, pushing him forward. He could almost hear them, living just out of sight in higher or lower plains... a faint echo ringing in his ears. It was heartening to know that Light still existed.

Backed up almost to the crumbling edge, Allarius tried one final desperate move, attempting to hack and slice away one of Harry's exposed legs as he stepped forward into his most comfortable stance.

As quick as ever, Harry deflected the blow, lowering his own blade flat against his leg. Allarius' clanged against it so hard that it became notched at the hilt, and then Harry struck. Raising his blade in a sweeping arc, the Boy Who Lived came up underneath the demon's outstretched arm - still vibrating from the sword strike of a second ago - and cut viciously and mercilessly through the flesh in its armpit, hacking through the bone in one clean swipe and taking the arm clean off.

Allarius screamed - glass within a mile shattered if it hadn't already, stone split and water boiled - and Harry grinned in satisfaction, even as the arm fell away to the ground at his feet, sword still in hand, he struck again - and again.... and again.

Stepping back and spinning his sword expertly, Harry used the demon's shock and surprise - a precious few seconds - to deal another blow... straight across the demon's quivering neck.

"DIE!" Harry roared. "JUST DIE!"

The sword of Gryffindor sang as it sliced through terrible demon flesh, taking the head clean off Allarius' shoulders and cutting off its screams. A fountain of dark blood surged up from the gaping hole and ate its way through anything it touched. The body still standing and shaking, as the head fell somewhere nearby next to the arm, Harry did not stop his attack.

*Slice.*

It's other arm fell to the ground before Harry hacked his way through the demon's bloody torso. His screams blotted out his senses - eyes blinded by rage, ears filled with screams - and when finally the battle heat wore off, he stood before an unrecognisable strewn lump of demon flesh. A steaming pile of broken bones, bleeding stumps of what were once limbs.

Harry looked up towards the lightning sky and screamed in triumph, pointing his arm still grasping the sword up towards the dark clouds, defiance in his screams - daring them to send whatever else they had against him.

"Well...." he managed, after he had calmed somewhat, his voice croaking and weak. "What now?"

He looked around at this unfamiliar city that was falling apart in flames and chaos, felt a small pang of regret, and turned away. Where to now he did not know. He was alone in yet another universe that could be anywhere along the Stream, at different depths in it. Where to now?

His golden scar link stretched unerringly north, slicing through to another world somewhere up ahead. He nodded as if that made sense, which it did, and hid the sword back in his arm - just out of sight awaiting his call.

*You did it, he told himself. There's no more dying... never again.*

But then, nothing felt right yet. He could still feel the poison in his veins, throwing itself against the magical barrier around his heart. *Shouldn't that have died with the demon?*

Harry faltered and stopped walking, his hands clenching into fists. Muttering a small oath under his breath, he slowly turned back towards what was left of Allarius....

He turned, hope faded, and moaned just in time to see the demon fit its left arm back into its socket. Small pieces of hacked away flesh flew up from the ground and swirled around its healing form. Dim eyes ignited with the fury and hate of all Evil, and power exploded in the demon like a volcano erupting.

Harry sighed.

"What will it take....?" he asked himself - the fully healed and glaring Allarius heard.

"Nothing, Harry Potter," it said quietly, dangerously. "There is no power anywhere that can destroy me. I am the EMBODIMENT OF EVIL ITSELF!"

"You're an asshole," Harry responded, cracking his knuckles and preparing for yet another round with this undying monster. "Who won't stay dead."

Allarius didn't smile; its eyes were pitiless coals. It had ceased to be a game for it, now that Harry had proven his worth and - for all it seemed - defeated him a moment ago.

"An eternity in Hell awaits you, Potter," it whispered, the very air quivering in fear. "Your soul is damned - and I will claim it."

*No power, Harry thought. No power in existence can destroy it... or perhaps....*

Slowly, but surely, the beginnings of a plan began to form in Harry's mind. He saw a chance, he saw a way. It was small, ever so small, and not guaranteed to work at all... but after all that had happened it sort of made a poetic kind of sense. Over in his mind a single line of verse he had heard over eighteen months ago reeled constantly.

Despite the deepening darkness, Harry smiled.

*But he shall have power the Dark Lord knows not....*

To Harry right now, it didn't seem wrong that the crackpot Professor Trelawney may have Seen more of the future than anyone had guessed, or could have guessed, and that perhaps the Prophecy - everything came back to the Prophecy - perhaps it had meant more than what was obvious.

But then there was a very fundamental flaw in this plan... one that almost destroyed it entirely. After all that had happened, could he find a feeling strong enough to unleash this supposed power. It had taken Ginny to be within inches of death last March, and even then he wasn't sure what had actually happened.

Then again, he had a plan - a rough, next to impossible one, but it was a plan. It all hung on the edge of a knife suspended between Heaven and Hell, and Existence could fall either way depending on that.

It came down to one thing - did he have the strength... *no...* did Harry have the *love* needed to use the magic that nothing truly evil can understand. Time would tell on this one, oh yes, time would tell.

\*~\*~\*~\*

### *Round 3*

Now, despite everything else, Harry did feel the eyes of other beings upon him, and he cast his mind back to that dream with Ginny, by the fire in the Burrow. It hadn't been Ginny, hadn't been a memory or a fantasy, it had been real - communication with something other than human.

Was that what he was feeling now?

*Ginny laughed - it felt and sounded so real as she squirmed on his lap. "A life form," she replied. "One that has never taken interest in the mortal universes before... before you. You're drawing all attention towards you, Harry Potter. Wars are being fought on many plains of existence for and against you. Terrible battles and awesome forces are lining up behind you. Darkness and Light are preparing for the End. And it all revolves around you."*

He remembered that from their conversation, and had sensed the thing's intent. It had wanted to use him - in its plans for Heaven knew what. He had not become her pawn though; he was a force unto himself.

Allarius could feel it as well, the sense of being watched, of silent cheers for both sides coursing throughout Existence. Potter stood before him, as defiant as ever, and Allarius struggled to believe that he had almost been defeated by this... by this *mortal*. It was shameful, laughable, it would not happen again. Potter was finished, tiring and almost through. Nothing and on one was coming to help him, he would die a thousand deaths before this was done.



"Follow me if you dare, Harry Potter," Allarius hissed, a blade of dark light swirling down his arm and culminating into a thin length of light stretching out from his closed fist.

Potter wanted a fight did he... Potter refused to die did he... It was time to take this battle to a whole new level, upon a familiar world within a familiar universe. Allarius cackled, swinging his arm through the air and cutting a hole between universes with his beam of dark light.

He stepped through and quickly jumped into a lower level of the canvas of this world, hiding in a bend of reality.

Harry scowled and walked across the crumbling tower building, forgetting the city wide chaos and stepped through the doorway in the air, lined with golden light. How he hated it, but Allarius would die.

Combing his memories - what remained of them - Harry recalled every one he could of being loved, of feeling love, of using love as power. They were few and far between, but they were still there - they had to be, or everything was doomed. He needed that *power the Dark Lord knows not*.

*Ginny*, he told himself. *Concentrate on Ginny... who he killed...*

Instead of finding love, anger enveloped him and the earth quaked beneath his feet. He bit down on it though, remembering what was important now - and recalled the good times, and that which had been true.

*Ginny felt so fragile in his arms and Harry closed his eyes as she rested her head on his shoulder. It may have been minutes or hours but when Harry opened his eyes again he saw Ginny looking back up at him. She looked so beautiful in the failing light as a few beams of sunlight played with the loose strands of her hair. She laughed slightly and raised her lips again and Harry lowered his to meet hers--*

That had been on the Astronomy Tower weeks before all of this had been set in motion. Christ, he had killed that beauty... *no, find love... keep trying...*

*"I don't know....?" he shrugged matter of fact, his voice a distant whisper. "Love... it's all new to me...."*

*Ginny nearly reached out and hugged him then, but she was self conscious of the people still in the common room, at least of Ron and Hermione. Too many questions would be raised, and she knew Harry was trying to avoid that. "Why are you fighting it then?" she asked gently.*

*Harry thought deeply and agonisingly for a moment. "Because... I'd rather not have it, if it could get you killed."*

*"What if it's worth it, though?" questioned Ginny. "What if it is more important than life or death?"*

So much was more important than that - and Ginny had known it from the beginning. Oh Christ, he had killed her.

For the first time since stepping through the tear in the air Harry looked around at the world he stood upon, and he nodded as it all made sense. Hogwarts castle, what remained of it, stood crumbling and broken on the horizon. Scorched earth and the burning remains of the Forbidden Forest lay beneath his feet. Gryffindor Tower still stood proudly though, if not a little scorched and crumbling itself.

*A symbolic representation of his defiance.*

Behind him the hole between universes closed with a snap, and he winced as his scar link was cut in two, before bursting from his forehead once again and off over the horizon, seeking a new path back... back to his own world.

*Ah, he thought, this is not my world - not my Hogwarts.* It couldn't be, not if his scar link sought a way out of this world. He was connected to Voldemort - his Voldemort - and the link stretched passed this world, he could feel that. Not his world, not his Hogwarts.

It still hurt to look upon his home in such a state though. Charred and broken bones littered the ground all the way up to the castle, and wands - weapons - stuck out of the earth at odd places. The lake had become nothing more than a dry dusty hole in the ground and above

storm clouds gathered with an unnatural haste. Thunder and lightning crackled on the horizon.

*Well, Harry thought wryly, at least no one here can die, seeing as how they already have....*

It wasn't a comforting thought, and the few steps he took forward caused him to sink into knee deep ash.

"ALLARIUS!" he shouted. A harsh wind took away the scream before it had even left his lips.

Everything seemed tinged crimson - there was no hope, no love - nothing and no one could save Harry now.

*"I can stop it, Gin," he whispered, holding her hand with his useable left arm and staring deep into her brown eyes. "But it means saying goodbye."*

*"Harry," Ginny said. "You better not be thinking what I know you're thinking."*

*Harry smiled sadly and brushed her hair back behind her ear. "I have to," he said strongly. "But I won't be gone long."*

*"You can't go through there, Harry," Ginny almost screamed, looking in fear at the growing darkness that was the tear in space in front of her. "You don't know where you'll end up."*

*"That doesn't matter," he replied, shaking his head as a single tear fell from his eye. "Voldemort has been beaten back for awhile. I intend to be back before he is."*

*Ginny started to cry and she sniffed, looking at the ground and not at Harry. "I almost lost you a moment ago," she managed. "I don't want to lose you now."*

*Harry lifted her chin up until she was looking into his eyes and he back into hers. Then slowly, but gently, he kissed her deeply and wrapped his good arm around her. "I'll come back, Ginny," he*

*whispered in her ear as she wrapped her own arms around him tightly. "I promise..."*

*Ginny sniffed into his shoulder as she realised fully the complete and utter hopelessness of the situation. "I know you will...." she managed.*

Harry paused for a moment in deep reflection. *How could I have left her?* he asked himself, not for the first time. *Why am I still alive?*

Sunlight shone off something half-buried in the ash and dirt up ahead, closer to the ruins of Hogwarts. Harry knelt down and picked up the small object... it was a mirror. Tarnished and cracked, he beheld himself in the scratched glass - wincing at what he saw.

His hair was matted to his head in a dozen places, sticking up at odd angles in others. Slick with blood both his own and demon, it looked a mess. His face was a bloated bruised nightmare. He could barely see out of right eye as it had taken a battering and his left eye was completely fused shut. His jaw had swelled to twice its size.

*Think happy thoughts*, he told himself, constantly glancing around for the demon as he moved closer to Hogwarts - what remained of it. *Hermione, Ron, and Ginny - Sirius, the good times.*

At times as he walked and held so much power, Harry thought he could feel... a barrier... for use of a better word, against another well of power - different power, and was encouraged by his thoughts and progress... but it couldn't be that simple, nothing like this ever was.

*"I can see you..."* Allarius' voice hissed across the barren wasteland, echoing in every hollow and hole for miles around. The wind howled as it spoke, but Harry didn't flinch.

"COME OUT SO I CAN GO HOME!" Harry replied.

*"You are home, Potter, you are home."*

The air bulged before him and the demon burst forth in a rage that shook the world. Harry met him head on, fists and arms colliding in the middle as power once again warred between the two of them. Harry delivered powerful, but overall ineffective, blows to Allarius's

stomach, and received a few to his face in return. Power built and they were both thrown backwards, rising again in an instant to repeat the process.

*Love, Harry thought, I need love... to destroy.*

Grasping the demon's arm, he turned on his heel and threw the monster hard into the ground, snapping something inside of its arm as he did. Allarius shrieked, spun in Harry's grasp, his arm rotating in its rotting socket, and kicked him hard in the kneecap. Harry went down as well, panting and wincing next to the demon.

Lightning forked across the crimson sky.

"Truly a battle for the ages," Allarius breathed. "Truly the greatest battle of any age. Never has so much rested on just two... albeit two of unmatched power."

Harry rolled to his left, pooling magic into his palms as he did and threw the spheres of raw power at the demon - as it rose. Allarius dipped and dived between them, and they flew for half a mile before hitting the ground near the remnants of the castle, exploding in a billowing cloud towards the sky.

Groaning, cursing, aching, Harry rose to his feet, struggling to find something - anything that would unlock his true power. Nothing... there was nothing.

*Think of the cost if you fail, he told himself. Think of the madness, and end it. Nothing is beyond you - absolutely nothing. Never let anything tell you otherwise.* Harry didn't think those last thoughts were his own, but he believed them.

Inside of him, it seemed for a moment that he felt something crumble, like a notch in a piece of wood. He was encouraged. *They're all dead, but they didn't have to die - and they won't if you can unleash your power.*

It only has to be once, just for an instant--

Allarius slammed into him hard, a writhing mass of power filled hate. The power drove them hard into the earth once again and it seemed for an instant that everything turned up on its head, a world of pain and insurmountable evil assaulted Harry's mind.

HE                WOULD                NOT                BE                BEATEN!

Crying out from exhaustion and dying life, Harry swung his fist up and hit the demon in the face, sending it head over heels backwards - buying a few more precious seconds.

*She loved you, fool. Ginny loved you and died for it - don't let that be for nothing, don't let the trillions upon trillions of wars and deaths mean nothing. Or are you weak, Potter?*

He laughed insanely as he berated and insulted himself into loving, into embracing the power he needed, but was so far out of reach.

"It shouldn't be as hard as all this...." he whispered. "But then again I suppose it makes it worth doing."

*"You won't fail," Ginny smiled.*

*"Why not?" Harry asked her, his haunted eyes seeking her understanding.*

*"Because you're Harry," she replied simply. "Harry doesn't fail."*

"Harry doesn't fail..." he moaned, his throat sore and rubbed raw - tears streaked his dirty and battered face. "Harry doesn't fail."

As if his tears had been the right answer to a question he hadn't known had been asked, another piece of the barrier inside of him fell away. He suddenly felt light, felt and saw light. Floating on a cloud, shining like the sun during the day. Darkness was there though, when could he honestly say it hadn't been?

"A fool waiting to die," Allarius mused, standing above him, his eyes on fire. "I had hoped to draw out your death slowly, but you have proven to be a greater annoyance than I thought possible."

Harry snorted, lying on his back in the ash and bones. "What'd you say we settle this with a pissing contest?" he asked, laughing insanely. "See who the stronger man is that way."

"Defiant to the last...." Allarius sighed. "You are truly unique in Existence, Potter."

"And you'd kill unique?"

Allarius radiated fear and hate, power and murder. "Without one more moment of hesitation."

Harry laughed and Apparated away just as the ground he was lying upon burst into flames thousands of degrees hot. He grasped the demon around the neck and twisted hard - he was rewarded with a more than satisfying crack, and the demon twitched in his grasp. He let it fall to the ground a wounded wreck.

"It's time for you to follow me," Harry growled, calling the sword of Gryffindor into existence he hacked away Allarius' legs and arms. He felt nothing - was a rock which nothing could touch or wash away. "When you pull yourself together, come and find me."

Screeching its hate, Allarius' shrieks trembled on the air. Harry smiled coldly, and Apparated away with a pop. It seemed that the anti-Apparation wards on the castle had fallen with it. Either that or he was simply way more powerful than that.

Nonetheless, he Apparated and in the blink of an eye stood in the ruined remains of Gryffindor tower, running the fingers of his hand against burnt and dirty cloth on one of the armchairs by the fire in the Gryffindor common room.

A great and gaping hole at least forty feet wide stood in the side of the common room, looking out on the barren and parched land that this world had become. Lightning played across the sky closer up here, but there were no clouds as the crimson sun burnt down mercilessly on this forgotten world.

Ash and flames had destroyed this tower, and the old wood creaked as Harry sat down in the chair by the broken fireplace, a beam of

sunlight stretching across the chair and highlighting the roaring lion in the stone of the mantle. Shaking with it all, he held his head in his hands.

*Love*, he thought, using the precious few minutes he had bought himself in butchering the demon. He felt no remorse over what he had done - he only wished it were more permanent. *Concentrate on love....*

*"We're your friends, Harry," Ron said. "Prophecy or no prophecy we'll stick by you."*

It is always the little things that mattered, that overly influenced the monumental things. That said, Harry could never have imagined he would be fighting this battle upon a devastated world by the remnants of his home. To go even further, he could not have imagined thinking these thoughts whilst fighting that fight under a crimson-twilight sky.

*"Don't shut us out," Hermione said softly. "Five years as friends can't be thrown away. We care for you, Harry."*

Waves of awesome strength crashed against the barrier inside of him, battering away at its foundations. Soon, he would get to it soon and then... and then... hope for the living and for the dead.

*"You won't fail, you don't know how."*

He shook, absolutely trembled with power that all at once offered redemption and threatened to destroy him. The castle tower swayed and bricks - slabs of ancient stone - fell away, splintering wood and the foundations.

But Harry didn't notice - it wouldn't have killed him if the whole tower fell crashing down upon him. It was beyond that somehow. Beyond time, destiny, fate, and war. He was beyond it all in some place no longer understandable... and yet he found sense there, *love*.

*I don't deserve it*, he thought. *Not when I've destroyed so much... sacrificed others without thought and pain...*



Anguish wrapped itself around his tormented soul - anguish wrapped in madness, and he could feel the barrier building itself back up around his true power.

*NO!*

*"Sirius loved you, Harry," Remus whispered. "He did."*

The barrier held strong, out of reach and yet there on the edge of understanding. It had always been there, across all the years - but his mind had rejected it as foreign. Love was foreign.

*"You may not trust yourself, Harry, but that doesn't mean that we don't trust you."*

Dumbledore, the Headmaster. Dumbledore the manipulator, the old man, the closest person Harry knew who had made choices similar to his own. He loved Harry, and Harry did think he felt affection for the old man... but not love, or did he? He did not know.

All of this in turn helped and hindered him as he sat in the dying chair within the remains of the tower. One thought pulled at the back of his mind though, and the thought was that he was a warrior - not a lover - and that thinking about it wasn't going to be enough.... tears of pain and frustration lined his dirty bruised face. *Something had to work....*

Wind howling in through the hole in the tower sounded like shrieks of agony and a ticking time bomb. He was running out of time - had the demon pulled itself together yet? Was it behind him right now? He didn't even look, not caring if it's blade was descending upon his neck.

*This is where it either stands or falls, he thought. This is where all becomes nothing - at Hogwarts.*

But then... should it?

It wasn't fair, that it should all fail. Why did it have to be that way, when it could just as easily be the other? Why couldn't he just reach out and grasp his true power? What was stopping him?

And in one sweet moment of realisation Harry knew that nothing was stopping him but his own perceptions. He loved Ginny, she had loved him in return, and that was enough - God, it was enough.

He stood and laughed - long and true. Not a hint of insanity was in that laugh, and he was still laughing as Allarius appeared at his side, smiled once, and then hurled itself into the Boy Who Lived, propelling them both out of the massive hole in the side of the tower - a flurry of burnt furniture and old stone following them.

Harry laughed and fell with the demon forcing him down into the earth. Power, raw power, not his true power, pooled behind him to brace the fall, whilst Allarius' power worked to counter that.

As they fell through the sky towards the earth, Light and Dark battled again, riding on the waves of air.

The impact into the ground knocked the air from Harry's lungs and sent hundreds of tonnes of rock and dirt erupting into the sky, wiping away what remained of Hogwarts's castle and hollowing out the barren valley.

Harry Potter wheezed, laughing and struggling for air as the enraged demon stood up before him, sword glinting in its hand and pure hate upon its disfigured face. Without a word Allarius shrieked and plunged his blade downwards towards Harry, who did nothing to stop him.

Harry screamed and still laughed, tormented and blissful, as the dark blade pierced his thigh high on the left leg, ripping through the muscle and flesh, skimming the bone and tearing out of the other side, pinning him to the earth. Blood seeped out of the wound and into the dirt around him.

"So it all ends here then," Allarius hissed, its arms igniting with power. "Upon the ground of Hogwarts, where it all began."

*No it doesn't end for me, Harry laughed in his mind, feeling the power inside of him as he surrendered to it freely, willingly accepting love and what he now knew it was. But for you... death is not a fair punishment, but it will have to do.*

So the battle was fought and worlds shaken and destroyed. Light lay before Dark, pinned to the ground with a sword of hate. Allarius' fists disappeared as two spheres of raw magic enveloped them. Joy and eagerness lit up that inhuman face and, now that it was all said and done, he threw them at Harry beneath him.

At that moment Harry ceased laughing and his face became a mask of serene calm, his eyes pitying and filled with something Allarius could not understand. All too late he saw his demise in Potter's eyes.

The demon's spheres of power impacted against something between himself and Potter that flared with a golden light, dissolving the magic and remaining in place over the supposedly beaten boy. Allarius screamed and screamed, throwing more and more magic - but the boy did not even blink.

And then phoenix song filled the air, coming from the boy. Allarius knew it and he despised it, wrenched his head right and left against it, stumbling back from Potter as the sound emanated from him.

"NO!" the demon cried. "WHAT IS THIS?"

Harry wept now and gazed at the azure sky fading into night, as it rained dirt and debris that was deflected around him. Despite it all he could feel love, his own and that of others - of Ginny. From wherever they were and wherever he was it was all connected, and that, more than anything else, caused the three golden spheres of light to rise from his chest.

They were beautiful, they were his... they were beyond comprehension.

Allarius staggered back in... in... *fear*. Evil retreated as the three spheres before the fallen form of Potter began to transform and take on a vaguely distinct shape. They were human, they were mortal, and they were his defeat.

Harry saw the light inside of him take form and he screamed defiance against anything that had dared try to defeat him and his true purpose - to reach the Ways of Twilight and set right the madness. Golden

representations of his love hovered before him, taking on the forms of who he knew best.

Ron, Hermione, and Ginny stood before him - a part of him and what his power truly was. Surely, nothing could be greater than this.

The two golden figures of Ron and Hermione advanced on Allarius, who was slowly retreating in disbelief, whilst Ginny turned to look down on him with a smile that held worlds of understanding.

Her slender golden glowing hand tightened on the hilt of the sword embedded through his leg, and Harry bit his teeth against the pain as she was about to pull it out.

Only there was no pain - no tears... only love and phoenix song.

The blade was removed from his leg, the wound throbbing somewhere back in reality, but here and now it was forgotten as Harry gazed upon Ginny. She frowned and the blade blew away on the wind as dust, before kneeling down next to Harry and stroking his hair back out of his eyes, her touch cooling and soothing against his forehead.

"You've done well," she told him, and Harry nodded - accepting. "You have called upon the true power bestowed upon you by what will soon be called Destiny... *your* destiny, Darkslayer - Harry James Potter, the Boy Who Lived. You have called upon us, and we will do what now needs to be done."

"Thank you," Harry whispered, and she smiled.

"I knew *His* faith in a mortal human was not misplaced," Ginny mused to herself, care and tenderness in her eyes. "One day you will have need for us again, but it will be harder next time - the True Magic source has almost run dry since the Beginning, and the fall of the Creator - this has drained it further to almost nothing... it will be your task to replenish it when you are done with war. Do you understand?"

Harry nodded - he did understand. One day... it would be one day. After his enemies lay dead behind him. Voldemort....

"What do I do now?" he asked this glowing Ginny, his voice wrought with emotion, as she let his head rest gently on the ground and floated into a standing position.

She smiled, and it was that he would always remember. *She smiled.*

"You survive, Darkslayer," she whispered. "You survive. Dark times still lie ahead, darker for you... and victory is not guaranteed." Her smile faltered here for a moment but in the end it returned and was reassuring. "For now... just survive."

The phoenix song in the air reached a crescendo and it seemed it would be heard across forever, as Ginny moved to join Ron and Hermione above the cowering form of Allarius, who was backed up against a boulder - shouting and cursing, throwing magic at the apparitions before him.

Harry watched from the ground. His arms lying flat at his side he turned his head and watched Allarius' defeat with satisfaction. It was working, he had won. The three ghostly golden figures descended on Allarius as one, losing their forms and striking his chest as three golden spheres.

The demon's screams were lost to the intensity of the phoenix song, as magic it could never understand destroyed its very being, ripping away its hold on Existence and sending it back into the abyss defeated. Evil was being dealt a devastating blow, and the Darkslayer was responsible.

*Harry Potter's victory was etched across the Halls of Eternity - where time only flowed in one direction.*

The light disappeared and Allarius ceased screaming.... Harry blinked and when he opened his eyes again the phoenix song had died away, and his pain returned. He screamed as pain wracked his body from the awesome fight, and his leg ached from the wound he had received there.

The golden light was nowhere to be seen, but Harry felt a warmth in his chest that was *good*, and without thinking of the consequences he

let go of the vast amount of raw magic he still held, had been holding for hours, and only then did he think of the poison in his veins.

He gasped, expecting death, looking down to his arm and expecting to see purple infected veins. He found only a slightly healed scar, and before his eyes a black ooze seeped from the wound and cleansed his body. He wept with relief. *Survive he would.*

Shaking - bruised, bleeding and almost at the end of his strength, Harry struggled to his feet and gazed around at the landscape before settling his gaze on the smoking corpse of Allarius, leaning slouched against the boulder it had died upon thirty feet away.

Limping as his left leg bled from the stab wound, Harry made his way over to the demon with a grim frown upon his face. He could still see the rise and fall of the agonised creature's chest.

*Allarius was still alive.*

*But dying,* Harry saw as he approached, coming to a stop a haggard figure before the demon. His eyes met the small fire that remained within the demon's own.

Allarius laughed his all too familiar laugh, and dark blood ran down his horrid flesh and chest. "That was... impossible," it managed, glaring at Harry beneath the setting sun.

Harry stood silent, accusing, for a moment. "Impossible or not..." he began, "you still lose."

Allarius laughed again, the fire in his eyes near extinguished. "Good show, Potter," it said. "But it was all for naught... you are being used by the Light." Allarius spat and cursed the name. "Drawn now into a battle that will crush you long before Existence can be saved."

"Die now," Harry said.

"Mark my words," the demon hissed finally. "It will never be over, not for you, Darkslayer. There can be no happy endings - not in this Existence."

Allarius died - truthfully and finally, but Harry frowned... he felt... *Christ, he felt the demon's power growing.*

Sure enough, the corpse of Allarius began to shine with a deep purple light - raw magic bursting out of its master without any control.

*It wasn't over....*

Allarius was dead, the demon defeated, but its strength was seeping out now - uncontrolled and unstable. It could not have been foreseen... not even by his true love magic, whatever that had honestly been.

"This world will be destroyed," Harry whispered, thinking fast. He had to get off it.

The air around him became superheated as the magic continued to grow as a glowing purple sludge that seeped from the consumed corpse of what had been Harry's most powerful enemy to date.

His skin on his arms blistered before he had a chance to step back, and when he finally did he knew his life was now measured in seconds. He had to escape to another universe before this one exploded away beneath him. He had to find a gap in the air, a tear in the fabric of the boundary - he had to...

"Follow the scar link," Harry whispered, looking up at the tainted beam that stretched unerringly north from his forehead. Off over the horizon and the destroyed and barren land. "But how? Hundreds of miles...."

The ground began to shake and catch fire as the purple liquid pooled and grew hotter - soon it would explode in a fiery rain of magic that would destroy everything.

"Survive she said," Harry grumbled, feeling pain in every bone he possessed. He dug deep into his pocket and pulled out the small, shrunken trunk. "This one is gonna be close...."

With a thought Harry enlarged the trunk and kicked it open. Digging quickly as he felt the heat of the magic on his back, he tossed aside

clothes and books, some apples and rummaged through his rifles and pistols until he pulled out the WindStream broomstick, long forgotten and ill-used.

He smiled and closed the trunk, a few bits and pieces of its contents still lying on the ground as he shrunk it and returned it to his pocket. Yes, he smiled; this was going to be one hell of a race.

What remained of his leather pants and vest caught alight from the scorching heat of the magic bomb behind him, and Harry threw the broom before him where it hovered at waist height. Tired, hungry, bleeding and bruised over his entire body, Harry jumped forward and threw himself on the broom and shot off high into the sky as a blur.

"Okey dokey," he managed, his throat battered. He had just enough time to turn north along the scar link, two thousand feet off the ground, before the world ended beneath him, and Armageddon came earlier than expected.

*Even in death, Allarius managed to deliver a parting blow.*

Harry pushed the broom from nought to two hundred miles per hour within five seconds, urging it on with thought more than anything else as the demon's hateful magic exploded with the intensity of the Sun behind him, sending ahead of him a wave of hot air that threatened to kill him then and there.

But Harry survived - it was what he did - and came out of the hot cloud of air and dirt just ahead of a wall of fire hundreds of miles high and wide, spreading out in every direction from the epicentre where Allarius had died. It dug deep into the earth and rose high into the sky, spread across the continent and chased after Harry who struggled to stay ahead of the massive explosion.

Harry screamed and raced along his scar link, pushing the broom on faster and faster, using a drop of magic or two to increase its speed. Beneath him the ground was a blur, but he could still see it cracking and rumbling, rippling in waves as it was eaten and destroyed by the unleashed pure magic devouring it.



The oceans of this particular version of the earth were flash boiled in seconds when the ball of expanding fire reached it - the Irish Sea first - and the water evaporated in an instant. It was an empty, desolate planet though - having suffered the effects of the Boundary's destruction almost first hand, as it resembled a world close to Harry's.

The Boy Who lived felt the flames at his back as he covered miles in seconds, tearing through the air as if the fires of hell were behind him.

*They were.* It was insane, and he laughed. *They were.*

Above him the sky tore open as reality could not hold the canvas of this part of this universe together against such force. A black hole formed in the sky above Scotland, sucking in light and matter, revealing nothingness and the horror that lay in there. Harry flew, he flew with Hope tucked under his arm.

The noise was deafening, in fact he wouldn't be surprised if the ringing in his head lasted for years after this, but he could stand it - had to stand it. On over the horizon the golden scar link stretched as behind and below Harry the earth was consumed.

He was screaming, still screaming, but he could not hear it. Here he was, having defeated Evil itself, beaten back Allarius, and this was his reward. He wanted to rage at the unfairness of Existence, but then he could only rage at himself....

*You've made a mess of things, Harry,* he told himself. *But don't give in now...*

He was flying so fast through the air that his hands shook on the broom handle and the amount of drag he was producing was astronomical. If he turned sharply, travelling as fast as he was, gravity would crush his eyes back into his skull. The G force would be that great.

But magic sustained him, and he leaned down lower on the broom, streamlining the air and forcing it on as behind him everything was destroyed and before him everything was about to be.

Dizzy and tired, Harry nearly did not notice when his scar link began to bend downwards back towards the earth, towards the ground up ahead - probably about three dozen miles away, although distance was hard to tell. Whatever it was, he would be upon it in less than a minute.

Controlling his descent as best as he could at this speed, Harry glided downwards until he was flying along the ground, barely a hundred feet above it, and before him he could see where his link ended - cutting through to a safe, new world.

*Once I get through it will close, he thought, knowing the destruction was right on his tail - mere seconds behind him. I'll have to aim it just right and fly through, and then keep flying.*

And then he was upon it. The tear between worlds was only ten feet by ten feet - if that. Three metres would decide it all. Travelling upwards of six hundred miles per hour, Harry used every ounce of skill he possessed to aim it just right.

Wind howling in his ears as it was sucked up and into the terrible black hole in the sky, the explosion on his heels, Harry bit his lip and gasped, just as he flew through the gap closer to the right edge than he would have liked. He didn't make it clean through, even as the hole started to close now that he was in another world.

The tail on his broom had nicked the side of the doorway as he had travelled through, and had been sliced clean off - left in the destroyed world as the rest of the broom travelled through to a new one with Harry upon it.

In an instant he was through and the tear in the air closed with a long sucking sound, but his broom spiralled out of control - losing its aerodynamic design and power. Harry spun through the air, washing off speed and feeling the weight of his load triple from the forces of air acting upon him.

He hit the concrete beneath him of this new world at one hundred miles per hour, the broom snapping underneath him and absorbing the worst of the blow. Harry himself was thrown from it - still wearing

his basilisk armour but no longer holding any power at all, and it was this that saved his life.

He hit the ground, and rolled and tumbled, scraping across it and leaving an amazing trail of sparks from the armour. He spun and tumbled across the ground and eventually hit a wall with still enough force to wind him again, and crack the wall. He cried out in pain, even as his fading eyes beheld the air where the gap had been *bulge* - as if the destructive magic in the other world was trying to burst through and claim him.

Gasping for air, Harry realised that that was exactly what it was doing. He prayed then, as he was out of other options, that the Boundary would hold the destruction back in that other world, and spare this one.

It was a populated world, he could see that as people rushed over to help him - those who had seen him hit the ground. And there were screeches of car horns, and tall buildings rose above him.

None of that mattered though, and Harry managed a final smile as the air stopped bulging outwards, as the Boundary held and he was, at long last, done with the fight.

"CALL AN AMBULANCE!" he heard someone cry, and felt hands grasping him. He couldn't hear anything else but a loud ringing noise after that cry, and before his eyes darkness had fallen.

One of Harry's last thoughts, before the darkness claimed him entirely and unconsciousness came, was that he had definitely earned this rest.

It was over; nothing more was to be said. Light and Dark had battled across the mortal universes, bringing death and destruction in their wake.

*But it was over, he sighed. For now, at least, it was over, and...*

....His final thought....

*And we became legends.*

\*~\*~\*~\*

## Chapter 28 - The Defiance of the Hero

I                      am                      a                      rock,  
I                      am                      an                      island  
And              the              world              around              me              breathes  
I                      am                      a                      rock  
I                      am                      an                      island  
*Eroded slowly by the Stream*

The              scars              that              cross              my              body  
Are              the              ravages              of              time  
I              will              return              here              no              more  
*Till I have gotten what is mine*

I                      am                      an                      island  
I                      am                      a                      world  
And              the              worlds              around              me              weep  
I                      am                      an                      island  
I                      am                      a                      world  
*White light and thorns disturb my sleep*

This              End              I              see              before              me--  
Is              it              nearing              every              day?  
These              powers,              Light              and              Darkness,  
*Hold the balance in their sway*

I                      am                      a                      world,  
I                      am                      a                      God  
And              the              worlds              around              me              crack...  
I                      am                      a                      world  
I                      am                      a                      God  
*...But, in me is what they lack.*

This              life,              not              by              me              chosen--  
Nor              this              machine,              wrought              for              war--  
To              be              a              vehicle              for              Life  
*Using a tactic I abhor*

I                      am                      a                      God,  
I                      am                      a                      man,  
And              the              worlds              around              me              pray

I	am	a	God
I	am	a	man

And, at sixteen, I am grey.

*The Fates, they plot against me  
But, I, no longer in their sway,  
Shall move between realities  
And await the coming day*

I	am	a	man,
I	am	a	boy
And	the	worlds	around me, dreams
I	am	a	man
I	am	a	boy
Tell me, can I be redeemed?			

~~Allie Ford, reader of the Hero Trilogy

Harry stared up with glazed eyes at the symmetrical white roof tiles above him, and his vision blurred after a few moments. He could smell the clean smell of a hospital - a sterile Muggle hospital - but had so far been unable to find out where he was and, more importantly, *when* he was.

There was a very good reason for this, and it lay solely in the fact that he was unable to move without every part of his body screaming out in terrible, agonising protest. It hurt to move - hurt to even blink. As best as he could tell, it had been three days since he had awoken to stare at the ceiling, three days at least.

Nurses and doctors checked him over periodically, and said things he couldn't hear at all. The only sound he could hear was a dull yet constant ringing. If he hadn't already been mad, that ringing would have driven him to it. He discovered that after three days it had become somewhat easier to open and close his eyes, but they were slightly light-blinded, and were taking time to recover.

That explosion - one that had destroyed an entire world, possibly a universe - had nearly killed him and, lacking any magical means to be healed, it was a slow recovery on a strange new world, lying crippled

in a bed - relying on others to move him and rub his sore limbs, tend to his wounds and feed him.

But Harry wasn't complaining - far from it. He knew, after all that had happened, that he was lucky to be alive.

And what had happened?  
Evil, in demon form, had been beaten back by a power bestowed upon Harry from a being of unknown origins. *The power the Dark Lord knows not...* He had been given an insight into some grand plan by the three golden spheres - his true magic - that had taken on the form of his friends.

He still had a destiny ahead of him - something big and exciting, no doubt.

Harry chuckled at the thought and it caused him to wince in pain and for the lights on the machine to his right to beep red and then green. Watching those lights was one of Harry's only sources of entertainment, and it did bring a young nurse running in with a concerned look upon her face.

She dashed over and checked his monitors, frowning all the while, before turning to look down into his eyes with what he had come to recognise as pity. Harry didn't want it, but it couldn't be helped... after the battle with Allarius he had been drained magically, mentally, and physically. He couldn't even lift a finger.

Harry watched the nurse's lips move, saw her press a few buttons on the machines, before smiling and leaving the room. He didn't hear it, but he got the message from the look on her face.

*Don't overdo it.*

\*~\*~\*~\*

A week passed, maybe a few days more, before Harry managed to successfully sit up in the hospital bed with the aid of the nurse. He could hear slightly as well - if the words were whispered right up against his ear. He could only croak in response though, as his throat

had been abused so much during the fight that even swallowing took its toll.

Needles and tubes sticking out of him, Harry leaned back against the plastic headboard of the bed with a sigh, nodding thankfully to the nurse as she removed his oxygen mask and leaned in close against his ear.

"Good," she said, her blonde hair tickling his ear. The left side of his face had been burnt at some point during the battle, and that healing skin was still tender, and he winced slightly as the nurse brushed her hair back. "I want you to try moving your left arm up and down for me."

Harry nodded, gasping now that he didn't have the supply of oxygen. Several of his ribs had shattered, one had grazed his right lung, and that was healing slowly as well. It left him short of breath.

The pretty blonde nurse - Nurse Wingfield, he had told her - held up three fingers and counted down from three, lowering a finger at each number. At one, Harry tensed his arm muscle, ignoring the burning pain, and lifted his arm a good seven or so inches above the white bed sheets.

Nurse Wingfield clapped, smiled and he let it fall with a sigh.

"Well done," she told him, leaning once again close to his ear. "I want you to practice that today - don't overdo it, and I'll be back to check on you in a few hours."

Harry nodded, breathing as deeply as he could and smiled slightly to her as she left. The young Nurse Wingfield returned the smile, but it turned to a frown as she gazed at his bare chest and arms - before she left.

Harry followed her gaze after she had left and took in the harsh collection of scars and blood stained bandages that were visible across his chest and arms - right down to the grey cloth boxer shorts he wore. It was a mess - a terrible mess - but he was young and the none magical ones at least would fade with time.



It took him half an hour to work up the strength to lift his arm - both of them - the next time, and after that a further hour to do it again. Even that much physical movement was draining, but he persevered - gritting his teeth most of the time, and lifted those arms, clenching his fists.

A burning agony swept up his arms and through his shoulders every time he tried to move them though, and, as he had had about a week to think about it, he supposed it was because of the amount of pure, raw, unfocused magic he had pushed through his system. Enough to level mountains, cut through to a planet's core, tear the sky apart. These were the after effects, and he had no way of clearing them magically, so it was a slow road to recovery.

Across his body dozens of feet of white bandages, some dirty and bloodstained, sealed the wounds he had received at the tip of Allarius' blade, the most severe in his left leg just above the knee cap and before the thigh. The dark sword had been driven clean through, and he expected a limp for some time after that one.

Out of the window straight ahead he could see glass and concrete rising high into the sky, a metal jungle - a city. He still hadn't been able to discern which city, what the date was or how long he had been here, but he made a mental note now to ask the nurse when she returned - if he could manage the few faint words.

Sunlight beamed in through the window, highlighting the dust in the air and playing with the glass ornament on the table at the foot of the bed. Where the light struck the crystal ornament, it split and splattered the spectrum across the cream topped table.

Also stretching *out* through the window, Harry - and only Harry - could see a thin golden beam, tinged with black and no thicker than his second finger. The golden scar link stretched out and headed presumably north, seeking out a gap between worlds - an unnatural hole in the Boundary, that was eroding it. That was destroying the foundations of Existence as a whole.

The prospect of that still staggered him at times, and that moment was one such time. Everything was so fragile, so kept in balance that one seemingly insignificant event could bring him to this point,

struggling to breathe somewhere... *somewhere*... in the mortal universes - which numbered in the trillions, the billions of trillions.

And yet, the scar link stretched forever onwards - a cord to light the way back home.... or at least to the Ways of Twilight.

*And whatever lay there.*

Harry caught movement out of the corner of his eye and turned to the wooden blue door just as it opened and the woman, the nurse, came back in wheeling a trolley of sterile hospital equipment. Harry knew what was coming and he grimaced - it was time to change the bandages.

It was, and it took forty five minutes in all, as he had to be lifted and turned and moved back into place, tubes and needles reattached and drips changed. When she had finished, Nurse Wingfield leaned in close to whisper in his ear.

"That'll be the last time," was what she said. "The next time we take those bandages off it'll be to remove the stitches."

Harry nodded, swallowing hard and struggled to speak. Nurse Wingfield saw him, cocked her head and listened for whatever he was trying to say. Her eyes were bright, wanting to know. *Everyone* wanted to know about the scarred boy in room 1997. Nothing was known about him beyond the fact that he had been seriously injured, and if the scars were anything to go by it had not been an easy life for the young man.

So, Nurse Sarah Wingfield leaned in close, her brown eyes staring with a questioning look into his mismatched green ones - that was another thing, he had the oddest eyes she had ever seen - and waited for the words....

Harry summoned up all of his strength, fighting back against the pain and exhaustion he felt, and croaked:

"....where....?"

The nurse heard him, stared for a moment, and then nodded. She sat down on the bed next to him and bent down to reach his ear. It was obvious he had suffered some sort of ear damage; the doctor had picked that up when he had no reactions to sound those first few days when they had all been desperate to find the boy's family, as his chances of survival hadn't been good.

Sarah winced in memory as she recalled the heavy bruising that had bloated the boy's face to twice its normal size - blocking his eyes and giving him a disfigured look. Thankfully that bruising and swelling had gone down a lot over the last week, and he now looked vaguely handsome - if a little pale and battered. Just one more weird thing about this boy, was how fast he healed.

"I guess I should've told you earlier," the nurse whispered apologetically into his ear, her breath warm against his skin. "You're in the Priority Care Ward at Kinfriar County Hospital. You were found twelve days ago - appeared out of nowhere apparently - two miles from here."

Harry gave a start at the name. *Kinfriar...* it had been the name of the village, Tarishma's village, a few worlds ago. Coincidence... there was no such thing. He swallowed a few times before asking:

"Wh... when... date?"

Sarah Wingfield nodded. "January 16<sup>th</sup>, 1998... Can you--can you say your name for me?"

Harry leaned back with the strain of speaking and blinked a few times to clear his vision. Time still flowed forward normally then, in this world at least. He would have put the date in January if pressed. Almost a full year since he had been tossed across the Stream and all this had begun.

He tried to find the strength to speak a final time, but he was very tired. The pretty blonde nurse leaned in closer as he moved his lips, searching for his voice. He finally found it.

"H-Harry," he managed. "M'name's... Harry...."

\*~\*~\*~\*

Gradually, and faster than even the most generous doctors estimated, Harry was on his feet a week later. He shook, his legs ached, and he fell once or twice, but with help he managed to walk across the room and, to while away the time, sit in the window and read the few magazines and books that the nurse - Sarah, she asked to be called - brought him.

Magic was at work in his healing, his own, and the bruising had disappeared, his face looking relatively normal. As he had expected, he limped a little with the left leg but that would also heal given time. His aches and pains in his joints and muscles slowly faded to a bearable level, and he regained his voice and ears as well.

That, of course, had led to a lot of questioning.

Sitting in the armchair by the window in a hospital gown, Harry recalled once such questioning session a few days ago, after the doctors had deemed him fit enough to get out of the bed.

*"Harry," the doctor said, a tall man with black hair tinged red on top of blue eyes. "Nurse Wingfield tells me that's your name."*

*Harry just nodded.*

*"Well, Harry, do you have a second name? Can you tell me where you live? I'm sure your family must be worried about you. We've been unable to track them down, you see. When you were... found you had no ID on you."*

*Harry levelled his eyes against the doctor's, unblinking, and said, "I'm Harry Potter. My home is nowhere you can reach and my family is long dead."*

*The doctor paled under the combined power of Harry's level gaze, the simple honesty that rang out clearly in his words, and by what he had said. "Well... em... do you, do you have an MRN?"*

*Harry shrugged. "What's an MRN?"*

*"A Medical Reference Number...." the doctor said hopefully, and his shoulders slumped when Harry merely shook his head.*

*"Where are my things?" Harry had asked next, looking around the room as if expecting to see his wand holster, shrunken trunk and basilisk armour leaning against a wall.*

*The doctor paused for a minute and then said, "In the cupboard across the room there."*

Harry flipped through the pages of the magazine carelessly, not reading but thinking, and at times gazing up and out of the window at the sprawling metropolis around him. Something kept pulling his gaze out of the window... something wrong, and dark. He hoped he was just jumping at shadows, as he didn't think he could fight a child in his current state.

Anyway, Kinfriar this massive city was called. Could it really be the small village he had visited a few weeks ago, centuries into the future?

*Nothing is impossible*, he reminded himself. Although it could just have been the same name - that was possible, but it didn't feel... true. It was the same world he had sent fifty thousand people to their deaths in, the same world he had very nearly burnt away with pure power. It was good to know, he supposed, that it survived.

Sighing, Harry tossed the magazine aside - not even knowing what it was about - and began to think about moving on, about getting back on track towards the Ways of Twilight after that little problem with Allarius.

He smiled, it was cold and grim - a killer's smile - and it marred his face every time he thought of his victory over Allarius. *Burning in hell now*, he thought with satisfaction. *Or ruling it...*

Harry knew he should be moving on, getting everything back to the way it should be and restoring billions upon billions of lives, reforming infinite worlds and saving himself... but it was as if he had all the time in the world to do that, and he did still need help walking any further

than the toilet and back. A feat which he was quite proud of after ten days in bed.

Sighing again with the weight of the world on his shoulders, Harry closed his eyes and stretched his limbs in the chair. He had definitely wielded too much power. If he was feeling the effects nearly two weeks later then he had definitely gone overboard. Of course, he was the first to do it so at least that was something.

And it had been necessary.

Nevertheless, he had itchy feet and an urge to be off travelling universes, seeking out the beginning of everything, where all points of creation met and grew from. He had an urge for adventure, and that made him bitter. He had done enough and seen enough, but still... he was required to do more and he had grown use to it.

"They won't recognise me when I get home," he mumbled, stroking his forehead against a developing headache. "I don't even recognise me."

It was true - he didn't. Looking into the mirror in the bathroom he had stood with his mouth hanging open for a moment at the stark, gaunt figure that stared back at him. Messy black hair, pale skin and a drawn face were his better qualities at the moment. His mismatched eyes still contrasted against one another violently, and the one or two scars under his eye - and the one on his forehead - shone a harsh red. His black hair had a fair splattering of grey in thin strands - more everyday.

Sarah Wingfield and the doctors hadn't honestly believed him when he told them he was seventeen. And he could see why... ah well, time heals all wounds, and he planned to wrap time around his little finger.

With a bang, Harry turned as the door across the room with the slanted blinds opened and his nurse walked in with a smile, carrying a new selection of books and magazines under one arm. Her blue uniform rustled slightly as she walked and her shoes clicked on the sterile floor.

"Good evening, Harry," she said, still smiling and dropping down into the chair opposite him, depositing the small stack of books on the table between them.

"Hello, Sarah," he replied without feeling. His voice was emotionless, his eyes hard. Her smile faltered at his tone.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

Harry shrugged and cast a cursory glance at the stack of books she had brought before turning to stare out of the window. There was a reason he had sat since sunset before this window, but nothing he could put his finger on. He felt... sensed... something wrong outside of the window, but whatever it was eluded him - or wouldn't come close. He was reminded heavily of the Darkslayer prophecy, and of the mark upon him that *attracted* dark creatures. He didn't want a fight, but if one came looking for him... Of course it could just be nothing, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

"Can't complain...." he mumbled.

Sarah *tsked* audibly. "You still haven't told us how you sustained your injuries, Harry... do you think--"

Something in Harry's mind clicked as he stared out of the window, and he realised he had seen something in the few moments Sarah had been in the room. What was it.... He turned back to the table and the stack of books.

The small leather bound book on the top of the pile drew his attention, and he picked it up with a frown, running his fingers down the cover and across the upraised letters of the title:

***A Storm of Rose Petals***

"Wh..." he began, "have you read this one?" he asked Sarah.

Sarah sighed and nodded, wondering if Harry had even heard her concerns over his injuries, and took the book from his hand. "An old fairytale," she told him. "One with a happy ending."

Harry clicked his teeth, his face stonily calm. "There is no such thing...." He turned back to the window.

Sarah shivered, as she often did around this young patient. There was just something about him... something cold, and dark. Even when he had been unconscious she had felt a certain *wave* of power surrounding him. He was dangerous, but only to his enemies... that sounded right.

"Well," she said, throwing her blonde ponytail back over her shoulder. "It's just a children's story I suppose. You know, the story isn't actually real but it has a moral."

Harry turned back and she almost gasped as his odd eyes looked upon hers. It was as if he saw through her clearly, right through to her soul. Her smile faltered again, but she replaced it quickly.

"How... how does it end?" he asked.

Sarah flipped through the pages of the book, pausing here and there at the pictures and reading out a few lines aloud. Eventually, after a few minutes, she flipped to the last page and....

"The demon army lay defeated under the might of the humans, although both sides had suffered tremendous losses and even as the victors turned for home a snowstorm of white rose petals fell from the sky to bury the dead. The land lay torn and ruined - mountains levelled and sky broken, but hope had survived. Light had beaten back Dark, and for a time peace fell across the world, and prayers were offered to the Hero."

Harry sighed. "Sounds unreal...." he mumbled.

Sarah nodded. "Well of course it isn't real," she said. "It's just a story, someone's fantasy from hundreds of years ago. I mean it's all about demons and magic so how could it be real. These stories are just fun to read... about fantasy and pretend."

*Pretend*, Harry thought, resting his chin on his hand. *It had seemed pretty real the other day*. He chuckled a few bites of harsh laughter.



"On second thoughts," he whispered, glancing sideways at the nurse, "I think I've read that one."

There was no longer any doubt in his mind that he had reached the same world he had marshalled an army on upon the Endless Plains. The same world several hundred years into the future. There was also no doubt that were he able to back two or three worlds, he would find this world hundreds of years in the past.

Existence just kept getting bigger and bigger. Not only were there an infinite number of worlds, but also an infinite number of stages of those worlds. Was there a universe for every second of time a world existed? The sheer size of it all staggered him, and became incomprehensible soon after the thought. He couldn't envision something that *huge*.

"Right," Sarah said. "Well there are others if you want to read, or... or you could tell me about yourself....?" she asked hopefully.

Harry's gaze followed the scar link off beyond distant buildings and through to another universe. "What do you want to know?" he asked.

Sarah paused in surprise for just a moment before saying, "How were you hurt?" she asked. "Some of your injuries were inexplicable, some healed extremely fast and others which should have scarred haven't. What... what happened to you?"

"You won't believe the truth," he said, running a hand through his hair. *Do you even believe the truth?*

Sarah Wingfield shrugged. "Try me."

Harry opened his mouth to speak, thought for a moment, and then shrugged. "I fell over," he said without a hint of a lie in his voice.

"You fell over," Sarah replied dryly, with a frustrated sigh. "You're a mess! You must have fallen pretty fast."

"I was until I hit the ground--"

"Tell me the truth, or the Hospital will have to get the police involved. Were you abused... or robbed... or *something*?"

Harry weighed her again with his eyes, tapping his fingers thoughtfully on his chair arm. "Alright then," he began, "okay. One year ago there was a wizard named Harry, now Harry lived in a world far from this one and, compared to all the other shit that's happened to him over the last year, he lived a fairly normal life. Unfortunately, young Harry had an enemy by the name of Voldemort, who dabbled in power and magic that shouldn't exist and, after all was said and done, flung Harry across universes and deposited him on a world similar to the one he left. You following so far?"

Sarah opened her mouth and gaped like a fish for a moment, her forehead furrowing into a frown. Harry continued.

"Now Harry was an orphan, but in this world he met the family he never had and, through a series of unfortunate circumstances, got them killed all over again. Also, getting back to Voldemort, due to Harry's connection with that madman Existence in its entirety began to collapse in on itself. The weather went crazy and trillions upon countless trillions died. Things were looking grim, and they got worse when a demon came onto the scene with enough power to destroy worlds."

"Harry," Sarah cut in, "stop--"

"Let me finish." Harry waved his hand, cutting her off. "This demon, who was a physical representation of True Evil, unleashed a demon horde upon this world hundreds of years in the past, which Harry came to after a man from the past of his own world, Godric Gryffindor, sent him on a quest of sorts to track down the Ways of Twilight. At these Ways... Harry could right all the wrongs, but the demon couldn't have that, could he. Harry and the demon battled to the death, and Harry escaped by the skin of his teeth, flying through Armageddon to crash down two miles from this hospital where he has been ever since.... Now, you know the truth, any questions?"

Sarah stood up as he finished and backed away, her eyes fluttering between cautious fear and uncertain truth. "You... You're either insane or you tell really bad jokes," she managed.

Harry laughed, loud and clear, the first time he had done so in this world. "You're right on both accounts there, Sarah," he said, still laughing. "But look, I'm gonna throw a spanner in the works...."

"What--?"

Harry clapped his hands and a dozen purple sparks burst through his palms and fell to the floor. Sarah jumped back with a scream and put a hand over her mouth to stop it. Harry smiled, twisted his wrist which flared to life with pure power, and created a dazzling white rose with nothing more than a thought. He blew on the dew covered petals and they flew from the bud to swirl around Sarah like snow.

"A storm of rose petals," he said to her frightened face. "Everything I told you was true. Everything! You're lucky to be alive today."

Harry watched her flee from the room, and as soon as she was gone he pulled himself to his feet and stumbled across to the walk-in cupboard and bathroom adjoining his room. Inside he found his things.

Shaking from the effort he returned the shrunken trunk to its normal size and dug around inside for some proper clothing. He found a single pair of jeans, black polo shirt and cloak... and that was it. No shoes and socks, nothing. He shrugged and put the basilisk armour inside the trunk along with his wand in its holster, before stripping down and donning the jeans and shirt. He would have to... *acquire* some shoes somewhere else. Before shrinking the trunk, he removed a few of the energy potions from the store on the side of the trunk.

Replacing the shrunken trunk into his jeans pocket, he stumbled - legs shaking - back out into the room and waved his hand at the door with a muttered word. A sealing charm - nothing was coming in through that door.

The fatigue he had been feeling the last few days caught up with him then, and he sank down onto the bed a shaking mess. Steadying his hand, he uncorked the potion vials and drained the three restorative mixes quickly, feeling the strength flood into his veins and limbs. It wouldn't last long - not if he was forced to use magic for anything.

Back on his bare feet now, Harry ran over to the window and looked out once again, down towards the street several storeys down. People moved like ants across it and cars streamed past in a long, never ending line - their headlights flooding the street with light.

*THUMP!*

Harry looked over his shoulder to see a security guard, young and fit, trying to enter the room. He turned away without another thought towards the man - that door would never be opened again. Sarah had gotten to him quickly though, and that brought a smile to his lips.

Back at the window, Harry turned towards it just in time to see it explode inwards in a shower of glass that cut his arms and sent him flying back into his bed, knocking the wind out of him. Coughing, he struggled to his feet as half a dozen winged shapes came shrieking in through the window, the smell of decay following them on the wind.

Harry's arm began to glow, even as he stood to face the vampires he had been feeling all evening.

"Darkslayer..." the nearest one hissed, blood red eyes and blood streaked lips forming into a sneer. "I believed you would be taller."

Harry grinned, but was mindful of overdoing it. He could kill himself if he tried to wield too much power after the fight with Allarius. He needed to recover before attempting that level again.

"I was wondering how long it would take you to show up," he grinned. "I've been sitting by that window for hours!"

The six creatures had spread out across the room, and Harry found himself backing up against the door he had sealed. He glanced over his shoulder through the pane of glass in it and saw the security guard, brown hair and wide eyes, back away fearfully from the monstrosities that, before this evening, had only existed in books and movies for the unlucky man.

"Honour beyond imagination will go to the clan that kills you, Darkslayer," the old vampire before him spoke again. It was a male,

rippling with muscled and grey flesh, white hair hanging to its waist. "The Seventh Clan will claim that glory."

"Bigger demons than you have tried," Harry growled, palms alight.

The six beasts cackled and the glass behind Harry cracked. With a cry, he pushed forward with a small amount of power, and blasted three of the creatures from existence, reducing them to ashy lumps on the ground and blowing a hole clean through the wall of the hospital. He wavered and almost fell from using so little power. He dry retched for a moment as the remaining three vampires closed in.

Harry looked up just in time to receive a powerful fist pummelling into his unarmoured chest. He wheezed against his cracked ribs and was thrown back into the glass windows lining this wall of the hospital. He flew through them in a stream of glass and landed outside in the corridor, which was sparsely populated with nurses, doctors, patients, and a security guard.

*Get up off the floor and kill these monsters*, he told himself, spitting blood from his mouth - he had bitten his tongue at one point in the last few seconds. Probably when he was thrown through the window.

"HARRY!" he heard a voice cry, and looked to his left to see Sarah standing with wide, fearful eyes back into his room through the empty window frames. Shrieks filled the corridor as, one by one, the vampires followed him through the wall.

Jumping to his feet, Harry put himself between the vampires and Sarah. He was bleeding from a dozen new small cuts and glaring pure hate at the monsters, he clenched his bloody fist and made to reach his raw power. As soon as he touched it, a wave of nausea swept over him and he stumbled yet again.

*NO! After all that he had survived this couldn't happen.*

A muscular decaying arm pushed Harry back into the white and green plaster wall, Sarah screaming and jumping to the side as he hit it hard. The vampire snarled and bared its fangs, lifting him off his feet by the throat and holding him against the wall. On the edge of his vision, Harry saw the brown haired security guard finally find some

courage and race forward towards one of the beasts with his baton raised.

The vampire sensed him coming and spun on its heel quick as a flash, tearing the man's throat out in a gushing river of blood before turning back to Harry - the real threat.

Struggling and pounding weakly against the clawed hand that held him, Harry found he could not draw breath, and he began to choke. All around him all too familiar screams rent the air asunder and he shook his head at it. *Don't even give me five minutes.*

Angry now, he raised his hands high above his head and called for the sword of Gryffindor, the shining silver blade appearing in his raised hand a moment later. Without hesitating, he shoved it down into the chest of the monster holding him and twisted. The sword exited through the vampire's back as it shrieked and died, melting away to nothing but a steaming pile of ash.

Harry fell to the ground and began to cough wildly; drawing much needed air into his burning lungs. Not even having the strength to keep the sword by his side, the blade returned to hiding just out of sight, inside his arm. The remaining two vampires advanced, snarling and lunging for his throat.

He couldn't stop them - didn't have any power, needing to breathe... he realised in that moment that he was about to die, that there wasn't anything keeping him alive - no higher power, no nothing. He could die here and Existence would be doomed, it could sway that way in a heartbeat.

"N--" he managed as the vampires descended upon him....

Only to be blown away in a cloud of white foamy haze that was cold and sticky. Harry looked behind him and saw the nurse, his nurse, Sarah Wingfield holding a fire extinguisher and blasting the two creatures. Her face was a mask of fear, but her eyes urged him to get to his feet.

Harry did, legs shaking and power waning - but he managed it. "Come on," he said as the fire extinguisher ran dry and the vampires shrieked in their fury. "I can't fight them."

"WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON, HARRY!?" she screamed hysterically. Alarms were ringing for some reason and people cluttered the corridor attempting to flee. Harry ignored it all, had been conditioned to. He knew the destruction that came in his wake well, and for now just had to live with it.

He took Sarah's hand in his own and they stumbled down the corridor together as the remaining two vampires gave chase. Sarah seemed dazed, wide eyed and fearful, she let Harry lead her.

Glancing over his shoulder, Harry cursed and ducked as a vampire flew overhead, snarling and biting, hissing and slashing with claws. The air from the powerful wings pushed him down to the ground, before he leapt to the right and slammed through a door into a darkened room. Still holding Sarah's hand, they lay side by side in the thin, narrow, lightless room.

Groaning with the effort of it all, Harry kicked the door closed just as the second vampire arrived and lunged straight into it. The shock knocked the door open again, but Harry gritted his teeth and kicked it closed, rising to his knees in order to reach the latch that would lock it.

*Snap!*

The door was locked, and the shrieks of the vampires outside hurt his ears. He turned from the door, knowing it would hold for moments only, and looked for a way out.

At that moment he longed for his power, but he may as well wish for shoes while he was at it.

Sarah was shaking, not having a very good day. It had started out well she supposed, what with the cute doctor in the ICU asking her out for coffee at lunch, but from there it had taken a turn for the worse. She knew she was shaking uncontrollably but seemed unable to stop. This night had changed her view of the world beyond comprehension, and her mind was only just now catching up.

Harry was a magician of sorts; the wounded and scarred boy was hunted by creatures out of fairytales that had sprung to life tonight as if they had always been there. She supposed they had. But it was incredible, like a movie or fantasy novel. It scared her, and there he was now, Harry, standing over her and saying something....

"Shit," Harry said, glancing around what he now knew was a small room for storing supplies. The walls were lined with shelves that held bandages and medicines, needles and amber coloured bottles. It was a simple square room and there was no way out except the way he had come in.

"Harry...." Sarah managed. "What... what is....?"

"Vampires," he said with a shrug, thinking about something else - how to kill them. "Reality is fantasy, Sarah," he then said, his eyes glowing in the dark of the storeroom. "There's no turning back now." And then she shuddered as he wrapped his arms around her - giving her a hug. *What is he doing?* she wondered. *Why...?*

Harry held Sarah tight and concentrated his remaining strength on Apparating out of this closet and preferably this city. The effort was enormous as he attempted to grasp the magic required to Apparate two people. He felt as if he were holding onto a cliff face with the tips of his fingernails, and everything rested on gathering... just... enough... *power*.

The door behind Harry splintered and a set of jagged claws reached in through the broken wood and--

*POP!*

Sarah screamed as the world blurred for an instant of instants and still screamed when she found herself lying on hard compact dirt amidst wavy spring grass, a universe of stars arcing overhead and the moon swimming across the sky three quarters from full. She frowned, wondering if she had hit her head or died or something, but then she heard something groan next to her.

Turning her head slowly, she saw Harry - yes, Harry - lying on the ground drenched in sweat, bleeding and blinking rapidly. Despite all that, when he noticed her glance he smiled, and whispered throatily,



"Nothing to worry about," he said. "Worse things than this have happened."

He laughed hard then into the night, as if this was a good joke. Sarah heard madness and heartbreak in that laughter, even as the boy's tired eyes closed and he fell asleep from the exhaustion he must have been feeling.

Sarah was not exhausted in the least; in fact her body was pumping with energy and adrenalin. She was scared and excited, frightened and on a high. It was amazing and terrifying what had happened, but it had happened.

*Reality was fantasy*, she thought.

She jumped to her feet, still dressed in her hospital uniform and made to run from Harry and into the night, not caring where she was only knowing that she had to get away from this mysterious dark stranger who had turned everything she believed upside down on its head.

But something stopped her... something made her stay and look again at the gaunt and weary figure lying on the ground asleep and bleeding at her feet. Perhaps it was the nurse in her, the desire to heal the injured, that made her stay - perhaps something else altogether, anything was possible tonight it seemed. But stay she did, sitting silently in the night by Harry, staring in awe at the boy who, at that moment, looked as if he did not have a care in the world.

\*~\*~\*~\*

Harry awoke and felt as if he had been drinking Firewhiskey for the better part of the night. He groaned and moaned, holding his splitting head and managing to crawl to his knees. He looked around through bleary eyes at wavy grass and a large, empty plain that stretched on as far as his blurred vision could tell.

His muscles and limbs ached with pain and, for a moment, he wondered where he was and what he was doing here. Unable to remember what had happened - if anything - he once again struggled to rise to his feet. When he finally managed it, his legs gave way and

he tumbled backwards with a grunt and fell on something that screamed.

"OW!" Sarah cried, jumping awake from sleep to find a pale and disorientated Harry lying across her. She crawled out from under him and for a moment could not believe she had fallen asleep. What with everything that had happened it seemed impossible that she could... but here she was with a pain in her lower back from sleeping in the dirt.

Harry saw her and in an instant everything fell back into place and he sighed. "Oh," he said upon seeing the nurse. "That's what happened."

"Good morning to you too," Sarah grumbled, straightening her blue skirt and standing.

Looking around again, Harry realised that it was indeed morning. Early morning as the wavy grass had a fine coating of dew upon its stork and the sun was low in the east. He frowned as something seemed familiar about where he was... something was--

"Would you care to explain yourself, Harry?" Sarah asked, standing with her arms crossed and glaring, tapping one foot. "And tell me what the hell happened last night!"

Still sprawled out on the ground, Harry looked up at her and managed, "Last night... last night we Apparated - disappeared from one place and appeared in another - away from your hospital because it was under attack by dark creatures I did not have the strength to fight. I don't know where we are, but that doesn't matter because I know where I'm going and I've got a foolproof map," he finished with a small smile, tapping that odd shaped scar on his forehead.

Sarah shuddered. "I know what you just said is impossible, but I also know that it happened. Am I... am I crazy, Harry?"

He laughed and she scowled. "No more so than the rest of us, and a lot less than I am," he said with a smile. His smile faded before he said, "If you'll excuse me now, Sarah Wingfield, I better be off."

Easier said than done. Five minutes later and he found himself barely standing with one arm slung over the nurse's shoulders. His arms ached and he could see one or two pieces of glass embedded in the cuts but found he didn't care. Now that he was on his feet, he could put his suspicions to rest about where he was....

"The Endless Plains," he croaked. "What're the odds on that?"

"Excuse me?" Sarah grunted, sour at having to support his weight. She was confused, more so than before he had woken up. "We're where?"

"Still in your world," he said, but she could tell he wasn't really talking to her. "Which is good because it means I didn't Apparate between worlds - that would be something I'm not ready to deal with."

"Still confused here," Sarah grumbled. "The Endless Plains.... you mean the Central Plains. Kinfriar sits just on the edge of the open land of Resmand."

"Who or what is a Resmand?"

She clicked her teeth in frustration. "Resmand is the seventy first state of Deschan, the largest continent on the planet... *you* following, Harry?"

Harry stared at her for a moment and then chuckled. "So they named the country after the King... wonders never cease."

"What?"

"Never mind. That's neither here nor there, but back and then."

Sarah nodded as if that, after all else, made sense, but then said, "Has anyone ever told you, Harry, that when you explain things you actually make things more confusing?"

Harry snorted and shrugged. "No one I know is left alive to tell me."

Sarah couldn't help the gasp that escaped her lips and she almost dropped the scarred boy she was helping to stand. "Who are you?" she whispered.

Harry looked up into her eyes and smiled. "I'm just Harry," he told her. "Just Harry."

"And what are we gonna do now, *just* Harry?" she grumbled. "We're in the middle of nowhere, you can't walk and you need these cuts seeing to before they become infected."

Harry stepped away from her as fast as he dared, managing to stand under his own strength. "My power will slowly come back and I can heal these cuts myself. Now I'm going this way," he said, and pointed due north. "North, because that's the next stop."

Swaying and stumbling along, Harry set off along his scar link, cutting his way through the grass and trying to keep going in a straight line. He left Sarah behind, couldn't waste anymore time. There were some things that needed doing, and the consequences had to be ignored.

*Had to be....*

"WAIT!" Sarah called out from behind him.

"Go home, Sarah," Harry sighed. "You follow me you'll just end up dead...."

*Was that true? He didn't know. It felt real, but what was real anymore? Fantasy....*

She ran up alongside him heedless of his words and looked lost and confused. "Well, Harry, thanks to you I don't know where home *is*. You... you're not just going to leave me out here, are you? The plains are empty for hundreds of miles in parts... what if--"

Harry stopped walking and turned as well as he could to face her. He met her eyes and she returned his stare defiantly, as if daring him to tell her she couldn't go with him. *Defiance*, he thought again, *it's a trait strong in us humans*.

Sighing once again, Harry looked down to his arm and the dried blood and glass in it. Absently he picked a shard of glass from one of the cuts - which promptly started to bleed.

"You don't want to go where I'm going...." he whispered. "I think... I think I won't have to travel far to get there, as we may have Apparated nearby to the tear in reality... but you'll be on your own after then. That sounds right, and connected somehow... I'm sorry you got caught up in this... it wasn't your fault you got too close to me."

Sarah bit her bottom lip. "I didn't understand much of that... but perhaps you could tell me as we walk....?"

Harry stared at her for a moment longer and then nodded. "Right," he said, scratching his neck, "just keep an open mind."

So as the sun moved across the sky, Harry made his way slowly across the Endless Plains once again with Sarah in tow. He couldn't walk far for long so there were many stops and starts, and the plains did appear to be empty, as he told Sarah his story - starting from the beginning, the day he had first left his universe.

Omitting many details and forgotten battles, not to mention everything else his torn mind had lost in between, it took several hours and Sarah's face went from surprised, to terrified, to disbelieving, to true fear, before she gained some measure of acceptance.

"And the link between myself and Voldemort has been tearing apart the Boundary - the walls that separate universes - and destroying those worlds corresponding to Earth and any other it touched. Has this world had any bad weather recently? Yeah, I thought so - consider yourself lucky it wasn't much worse... there weren't any roses here to protect you...."

There were rocks and prickly grass beneath his feet and Harry was really missing his running shoes and basilisk hide boots. But they were lost unfortunately. The boots were a sore loss, but there was always another basilisk, he supposed. When he turned back time

there would be a fair few under Slytherin Fortress - which, he supposed he would have to destroy almost right away.

"Allarius wanted power and for me to fail in reaching the Ways of Twilight, the centre point of Creation - so I could fix all that has happened and restore countless lives and worlds.... if I fail to reach them... t'would not be good. Anyway, I met Allarius in battle on these plains, hundreds of years in your past - three or so worlds ago and about two weeks for me. We fought... oh yes, we fought...."

He stubbed his toe at one point and almost fell, but Sarah caught him and he could feel her hands shaking. Muttering thanks and shaking his head, he continued with the story. It was... soothing, relaxing, to finally tell someone the truth - even if that person did not fully believe him. No matter, he had lived through it and still had trouble accepting what had happened.

"Even in death Allarius attempted to kill me, his power seeping from his corpse and exploding. Do you have any idea the amount of power the demon possessed? It was enough to destroy an entire world and tear apart the sky, ripping away the fabric of the canvas and plunging that entire universe into ultimate darkness. Just one more reason to reach the Ways...."

It was long into the afternoon and Harry was weary from hunger and walking, but he had felt worse. His feet were blistered and sore from the ground and his arms felt heavy. But throughout the day he had felt a weight lift from his shoulders as he had told his tale, and also felt his magic slowly replenish to a usable level. He should be some use if the vampires tracked him down that night.

"So," he said, upon completing his story. He and Sarah sat on a flat topped rock sticking up in sharp contrast against the almost uniformity of the level plains. "I've told you the truth... what do you think?"

Sarah gaped. "What am I supposed to think?" she asked. "You've just told me something out of a fantasy novel! That you were the hero in the story, *A Storm of Rose Petals*, and that you are out to save Existence and will kill anyone or anything that gets in your way! What should I think!?"

Harry nodded thoughtfully. "That about sums it up," he said. "I reckon you should decide what you're going to do next. You have a life in this world, family maybe, and friends. You know where I'm going, following this." He tapped his forehead. "You can come with me, if you want. I won't stop you. There are universes of adventure out there, universes of infinite possibilities. It won't be a dull life, if you come with me... and eventually it will never have happened, once I fix everything."

Sarah held her hands in her lap, the wind blowing her long blonde hair about her face. She had tears in her eyes and she was shaking again. Everything had been so much simpler twenty four hours ago. How could this be real....?

"I must be dreaming," she whispered deeply, shaking her head. "A battle scarred teenager from another world is asking me to come exploring different universes with him... giving me the chance to choose between *that*, and returning to the hospital." She laughed nervously. "If you were me, Harry, what would you choose?"

Harry shrugged, scratching his nails on the rock. "I can't answer that - I've never known a life like yours... normal, for use of a better word. My entire life has been one battle after another really, I mean it was a battle to survive at the Dursleys...." he trailed off and chuckled mirthlessly. "Trust me, there will be no end to the wonders you'll see if you come with me, but there will also be a lot of darkness.... I'm hunted by the Dark," he whispered.

"Darkslayer, you said," Sarah sighed.

Harry nodded. "Aye, Darkslayer. The mark of a warrior for the light blazing upon me like a beacon for every dark creature within hundreds of miles. How do you think the vampires found us last night? They won't stop hunting me, not for anything. Each new universe will bring a whole new house of horrors. Perhaps it is better if you stay here... you'll live, that way."

Sarah looked at him askance. "I'll live and probably regret giving up the chance to *leave* this world - to see other cultures and creatures. Oh, I don't know, Harry, I just don't know!"

'Think on it," he said, standing up. "And when we reach the doorway between universes I'll hear your answer. Being there might help you decide."

They moved on as the sun began to sink on the western horizon, along the wavy grass plains, casting the washy orange-azure colour of twilight across the sky that was sparsely dotted with the first stars of the evening.

At one point they came across a deep rift in the earth, uneven and ending in a deep crater that ruined the flatness of the plains. It was overgrown and full of grass and rocks, buried in parts and bumpy along its thirty miles of length.

"This is Evenson's Crater," Sarah said. "A meteor struck the earth here hundreds of years ago."

Harry nodded and walked down into the rift - following the scar link - and said, "This wasn't done by a meteor. Allarius... Allarius and I battled here - we're close to the doorway now - we battled here and our power caused this rift and the crater at the far end used to have mountains sitting in it. We... em... we blasted them to nothing, I suppose."

"That is incredible," Sarah whispered. "Reality is fantasy."

In the end, of course, the tear in the fabric of this world was in the same place Harry and Allarius had created it during their battle upon these Endless Plains. Everything was connected, everything eventually came full circle. Harry believed that was a Great Truth, if nothing else could be in these uncertain mortal worlds.

Night had fallen and a star shot sky looked down upon the two travellers before the unnatural break in the fabric, which looked through onto a rocky valley situated between the cleft of two mountains, as far as Harry could see. The hole burned in the air, golden light surrounded its edges and burning the air as if it were paper.

It was a wound on the greatest life form - Existence. Harry knew he may spend his life closing these before he reached the Ways, and



that duty was justly earned. He had been so foolish and arrogantly confident to think he could play within the Stream and not expect any consequences. He and Gryffindor both.

Sarah had fallen to her knees at the sight of the doorway between worlds, between universes, and her hand flew to cover her open mouth as she stared with tear stained eyes into what may or may not be the rest of her life. *Did she dare go through? Was she really looking into a completely different universe?*

Harry stood next to her emotionlessly, glaring into the next universe he had to enter. With any luck it would be an uneventful one, and he could have a chance to rest. "Impossible, isn't it," he whispered without feeling to Sarah. "Yes or no? Make your choice, Sarah Wingfield, because I've got to be getting on."

Slowly, Sarah stood up and reached forward to put her hand through the gap and felt the wind of another world upon her now clenched fist. A shiver, not from the cold, ran through her body and she almost fell again. A life altering choice lay before her feet, a world altering choice. Did she dare go?

*What are you leaving behind if you do?* she asked herself. *A few bills, a cat, and a nine to five job at the hospital... Mum and Dad are dead and buried, and through that gap lies what could be the greatest story ever told. What's stopping you?* "Once I step through," Harry was saying, "it will close. One minute."

*He's so cold,* she thought, glancing nervously at Harry. *He'll be all I have if I go, and he's so cold and distant... but powerful. He's going to save the universe - universes - and battle Evil and...*

"I won't make the choice for you," Harry spoke again. "You have to step through if you want to come."

*Walk to heaven, to the Ways of Twilight, that's an odd name, and warp time - fix all the bad he caused. It's a quest, a quest that has already cost oceans of blood... will he kill me if I follow? Is it worth the risk to see the very beginning of everything? Yes, yes it is. Not taking the risk would be the wrong choice...*

And at that moment Sarah Wingfield left her normal life behind, in a moment of courage, and left her world with it - stepping clean through onto hard rocky ground within a valley in an entirely new universe. She had taken the first step towards her death, and even this early in her role in the game the Grim Reaper, Death, hung over her - his rusty scythe swinging precariously before her throat.

Harry shivered as she stepped through the gap, and he could swear he felt something cold follow her through, but the night was empty in this world now save for himself. Shrugging off the feeling, blaming it on his tired mind, Harry followed her through, and the doorway closed with a great sucking sound behind him.

"No turning back," he told Sarah who, despite her choice, was smiling gently. "We should get some rest here," he continued, gazing about at the small rocky clearing that was splattered with soft ground here and there, "before moving on. I'll light a fire and you can have my cloak."

"Thank you," she whispered, shivering in the night air. At least, she thought it was the night air.

*Don't fear the Reaper.*

And that was it....

Harry had caught another innocent in his game against the Darkness, another life... but it was only the beginning, really, after all that had happened it was still only the beginning. Perhaps the end of the beginning, but it was far from over at the least - and the pieces were moving in. What the future held was uncertain, but worrying....

Defiance had cost Harry, he knew that now - had really known it for months. That was what he thought as he busied himself collecting dry wood to ignite with magic for that night's warmth. It would be the first campfire of many now that he was truly on his quest for the Ways of Twilight.

Sarah had sat down across the clearing and was hugging herself against the cold, he stepped up the pace. Staring at her for a moment, Harry shrugged and dumped the wood back on the edge of the

clearing before going further a field for more. He felt certain something had changed with the air the moment Sarah had stepped through to this world, but he couldn't pinpoint it - and never would. This was one mystery that only the dead could solve.

*Don't fear the Reaper.*

Still, his defiance in the face of evil had tipped the scales for him now. Marked as the Darkslayer, the man prophesized to destroy thousands of dark creatures and stand alone against inevitability... if what Allarius had said was true - and that meant he had a long life ahead of him. A long life bursting with defiance.

*The Defiance of the Hero.*  
He had changed, oh how he had changed from the boy he had been even a year ago, when he first left his world. And before that, eighteen months ago, he had all but forgotten who he had been then. Yes, defiance had cost him - cost him dearly. It couldn't be avoided, the sacrifice and rivers of blood... the epic size of what was spinning about his head.

Harry had come to realise he was a pivotal point in the workings of Existence, and was on the right side - even if it was slowly losing to the Darkness after an eternity of war. Though he possessed a power that spoke of something beyond all of this... spoke of love, perhaps the true power of Existence.

Perhaps... where did that come from?

Something told him he had a long life ahead of him to figure it out, and maybe one day he would be redeemed for what he had to do to survive - and save Fate and Destiny, Life and Death, Everything that deserved to live and be remembered. It would not all end because of Evil... that couldn't happen.

*Won't happen, Harry thought. Not so long as I exist.*

And when you cut it right down to the bone that was all that mattered. That he existed.

So the future was uncertain.

The Ways of Twilight perhaps millions of worlds away.

But hope was still with him, riding on his shoulders upon a wave of time that washed all else away - leaving Harry once again as the lone survivor.

The Last Hero.

He laughed out loud into the dark night, arms full of wood. "I love you, Ginny," he cried, and beings beyond his sight took notice. Beings of Light, souls of the dead and life itself. "Ron, Hermione - you too. I'm coming... one day it will all be played out, and I'll reach the end game. One day... I'll see you again, and we'll look back on this over a butterbeer and laugh."

He was laughing then, at least... and it had nothing to do with madness.

The thin golden beam stretching from his forehead arced over the distant mountains and was lost to the ether of the horizon and he nodded. Everything was connected - he had a destiny, mayhap *was* destiny, and he would follow that beam to the future, and fix it all.

Nothing could stop him, absolutely nothing could stand in his way. He was the survivor... the Darkslayer... the Boy Who *Lived*.

There was so much to do, to set right, and life he still had. He was still alive, despite the odds and everything that had been set against him. That had to count for something, *would* count for something. The road stretched on for miles yet beneath his bare feet, but it would all work out in the good before the end - it had to.

*Nothing was impossible.* Sirius Black had told him that once, on the bridge between life and death. Right then, Harry could truly appreciate it... even if he did not precisely recall where that thought had come from. And yet, the road was before his feet.

He just had to walk it.

"Though I better get some boots first," he whispered to himself, carrying an armful of wood back towards the clearing. "Boots first, then do the hero thing."

\*~\*~\*~\*

## Chapter 29 - The Last Hero

*My soul is tired... I wanna rest.*

*~~Fox Mulder*

An old man with a short whispery silver beard sat hunched in the saddle of his horse, clopping wearily along the ancient and long since abandoned dirt road - the same road he had been following for a lifetime, really. Leaning forward in the saddle, the grey old man reached down to stroke the horse just behind its ears. The animal whinnied and this brought a smile to the man's tired lips.

A travel stained cloak was draped around the man's shoulders and he had the look of a fighter, even in his obvious old age. The small saddle bag was also travel stained, the brown leather faded and beaten by the weather. All up, the man appeared just as he was from a distance - a rider used to horseback, a man used to travel and war.

Get closer though, and the man changed. He was old, over a hundred at least - but magic had lengthened his life and would continue to do so. That had been important, the man had discovered many decades ago. If it hadn't have been, he never would have made it so far.

Wrinkled and scarred, the man's face made him appear older than he was, as did his eyes - cold and without any flicker of emotion, they may as well have been dead. One was brighter than the other though, a scar of a battle long ago. A battle the old man could still recall, could still remember with a sparkling clarity.

Despite his old age, beneath his clothes and armour the man still was fairly fit - if not heavily scarred. He could still run with the best of them, or so he liked to think. Kicking his booted heels, the man clucked the horse on at a faster pace, traipsing the old limestone road while there were still some daylight hours left.

Soon, as he had seen the layout of the land further down the road and on the maps back in the township where he had bartered gold for the horse, he came across a small rise that looked out upon open savannah country, a small crystal stream arcing and bending across

the wide land that herds of indistinct animals grazed upon - red sand glowing in the sun. It was beautiful, it was spectacular - the man had seen it a thousand times before in a thousand different places.

Dismounting the horse, the man grunted as an old wound in his leg flared to life to remind him of his youth and he wheezed sore laughter. He scratched at his leg absent-mindedly and pulled the walking stick from his saddlebags.

The old man walked huddled and pained along a barren and dusty road, his footprints leaving little indentations on the hard compact path. The man walked with an age old limp, with a walking stick that he hated having to use, and a pained expression that spoke of the hard life behind him.

Coming to the rise, he glared out at something only he could see stretching beyond the horizon across the savannah.

"What'd you think?" he whispered to himself, but his eyes glazed over as if received a response. And he did.

A youth, no more than seventeen, had appeared to the old man's left, his dark hair and eyes scanning the horizon with a flicker of amusement. The youth was arrogant and cocky, always had been - but then that was Ethan Rafe.

"Same as ever," Ethan sighed, his black robes not moving in the wind. He wasn't really standing there, the old man knew - never was.

"We'll move on though - same as ever," the old man rasped, his voice cold and harsh. Deep and powerful, even. "Always moving on...."

"I told you a century ago that you'd never make it, Potter," the apparition of Ethan Rafe said, still standing on the slightly rocky rise, glancing out at the open land beneath the both of them. "But you'll die walking on this road... before you give up."

Harry zoned him out, had learnt how to do that decades ago. He thought back for a moment then, back to when Ethan had first reappeared in his mind after Allarius had shattered his soul to its far corners.

*"Hello again, Harry," Ethan had said, five years after the demon was defeated. "Good to see you're still alive."*

*Harry hadn't been surprised; nothing could surprise him much anymore. "You're back then, Ethan," he had replied. "I knew you would be, I suppose."*

*"It does seem we're bound together for awhile yet, Potter. So... what's the plan?"*

The old man, Harry Potter, chuckled and climbed back into the saddle of the horse. It hadn't taken long after that for Ethan to learn how to project himself before Harry's eyes, appearing next to him as it looked. But only to Harry's eyes, and only that because he lived in his mind. It was like manipulating his eyes to see him, or something similar.

Even though, the disembodied *spirit* of Ethan Rafe had been his only constant surviving travel companion over the long, oh so long, years. Vaguely then, Harry remembered the first woman he had picked up in his game after defeating Allarius - Sarah Wingfield.

Sarah Wingfield - the blonde haired nurse.

He had buried her by the side of the road within their first three months together. She was a victim of a concentrated dark creature attack, in which Harry had won - just barely, and in which had seen Sarah cut in two with a broad bladed axe.

There had been others after that, of course, there were always others looking for adventure, looking for a life on the road or an escape from the mundane lives they had been leading. Most dead, others turning away after only a few weeks with Harry. Sometimes the sight of those hunting him had been too much, making everything all too real. No loss, he had survived.

Harry clicked the horse forward along the road which reached its rise and then began a steady decline towards the flat grassland of the savannah.



"You could have gotten a better price for the horse, you know," Ethan said, walking alongside Harry who moved slowly down the road. "You paid three times what it would have cost a hundred worlds ago, and that world was no different to this one."

Harry nodded. "I have no other use for the coins though, old friend. And they were a poor people."

Ethan snorted. "They are not so poor anymore."

Harry laughed, his eyes watering. "You know," he said. "The only thing that's kept me sane across the long years has been you... thank you, Ethan."

Ethan waved his hand and frowned, dismissing the thanks. If he had it his way, he would not be stuck inside Potter's head, but there was no other way. The Killing Curse a century ago had bonded them together and there had been no success in getting himself out of Potter's mind. And they had tried; Harry had tried at his request and even when it became too much for him to be there.

Nothing had worked though; no amount of magic could free them.

But the words with Ethan now caused Harry to reflect on the long life he had spent travelling worlds - meeting strange people and cultures, fighting the Dark and fulfilling his quest. To reach the Ways of Twilight, which had remained as elusive as ever... but nevertheless he moved on towards the next world.

Always the next world.

Harry was one hundred and seventeen this year, having been keeping track of the time. Probably not to the day or even within a few months, but he had the year down right. Looking back, he realised he had lived a rather exciting life across many worlds.

Thousands of them, hundreds of thousands. He had crossed and closed at least one hundred thousand doorways since beginning this task. And each time he did it, it was as if he could hear Existence sigh in relief. It hadn't just been simple travelling though - far from it.

He was the Darkslayer. And he had done just that.

On at least every other world he had ever been on there had been an attack of some sort - from some dark creature. Vampires for the most part, or monsters resembling vampires. Animals with tentacles, magical properties. Dementors, Nundus, Chimera, from those worlds similar to his own - the ones he remembered anyway. The Lethifold, that was a sneaky bastard. Gremlins had been entertaining... as had the ugly yellow gnomes.

He had killed them by their thousands, his knowledge of his magic growing with age and experience. Harry had also fought in many wars and campaigns across the worlds - some carried out in his name - Holy Wars - others raised to stop him by the Dark. He had learnt more about warfare and fighting than any other mortal, anywhere. He had had the opportunity on almost a daily basis.

Given time, his torn mind had also slowly healed itself, and he had ceased to forget things - or let memories slip away. He remembered everything about his childhood, about the years spent at Hogwarts and his friends there.

Yes.

No matter how long it took to get home he promised himself he would never forget Ron, Hermione and Ginny. They were long dead of course, in this hellish version of Existence-wide reality he had inadvertently created. But, again, the Ways of Twilight would see to that. So much rested on reaching them, and he had never once tired of the journey. He would die to get there, if that was his purpose.

And he was close - Harry knew it. *Could feel it.* In the air, in the life and land - in his magic. He was close. Something would happen soon, on this one hundredth year of his quest, something would happen... possibly as the world descended into twilight. It would be fitting.

Ethan had disappeared some time ago but Harry could still recognise his presence in his mind, sitting and waiting - hoping for salvation like Harry was at the Ways of Twilight. Despite his grumblings and beliefs, Ethan wanted to reach the Ways with almost the same passion Harry possessed.

He led his horse off the road now and onto the grasslands, pausing a few minutes so the horse could chew on the dry grass. He thought back on the many worlds he had seen, even more he had forgotten, and still was shocked to realise he had made it so far.

Stroking his beard with a gnarled and slightly arthritic right hand, Harry recalled the worlds, the universes that made up the mortal stretch of Existence. It was astonishing.

Worlds completely ruined, completely destroyed or barren - empty lifeless worlds. Others not so empty. Sometimes similar to his own, or sometimes deep in the past. There were worlds of technology at such an advanced level that cities spanned entire continents, millions of square miles long.

Then there were the doorways between worlds - Harry had had trouble reaching them more than once. Sometimes they were discovered by the people of the world before he got there, put under armed guard or used. Armed forces had tried to stop him from reaching more than one gateway. He had become quite adept at stealth entry and sneaking in his youth, and could today disappear into a shadow without magic - becoming invisible in the centre of a field - or less - in almost full sunlight.

His wrinkled and scarred cheeks rose slowly in another small smile as he recalled some of the better times of the last one hundred years. He had never stayed in one place for long, and never in any place longer than two months - and only two months because he had broken both his legs and had no way to heal them save naturally - but there were some utterly breathtaking places in existence.

There had been a world that held nothing but peaceful folk who tended gardens, taking joy in growing life out of the dirt. A world devoted to harmony and that fought chaos in all of its forms. Simple, peaceful - not for him, never for him.

But it hadn't all been roses and peace, not by a long shot.

War.

No matter how hard he tried Harry always found himself in the heart of another war upon a world he had never been to before. Always the same, wars for money or power - or to defend a land against an invader. He had a strong suspicion that he was drawn to them, that it was just what he did.

*It's what you were made for,* Ethan spoke inside of his mind.

"I can't accept that," he whispered harshly, kicking the horse into trot again - following the golden scar link. "Who could?"

*You're a survivor, you have to do what you have to do - and you had to survive. It's your nature to rage against death.*

"I've cheated it enough times...."

Ethan laughed. *I don't think you can 'cheat' death. You've survived against the odds - merely have not died. Death, when it comes, Harry, will come for you like it has every life form before you. That is one thing you cannot fight.*

"Don't fear the Reaper," Harry croaked, holding his chest. He felt increasingly out of breath these days - he hoped he was not coming down with a lung infection. Without medicines he could die.

*What makes you say that?*

Harry paused for a moment before replying, casting a look quickly to his left and right, and once over his shoulder. "I just got that feeling again...." he whispered.

*The chills and thrills feeling?* Ethan asked, and Harry could feel the boy in his head come on guard, defending his mind.

"Yes," he replied. "All my life... the long lonely years... ever since Sarah was with us...."

*You're being watched by something...* Ethan suddenly appeared solid and real down to his left, patting the horse which didn't feel a thing. "Watched by something," the teen continued, "that cannot be seen."

Harry nodded. "Something cold, dark, but not evil."

Ethan knew what he meant - he could feel it too, even though he lived within Harry's mind - it seemed whatever it was held no sway over that barrier. Ethan was, after all, partly a soul trapped within the mortal worlds.

"Death..." he began slowly, not liking where his thoughts were taking him. "Death... is not evil," he whispered. "It is a natural thing."

Harry clicked his teeth thoughtfully, grasping his reins tightly. "Do you really think we've been followed by... for all these long years, the R--"

"Yes," Ethan mumbled. "With you, anything is possible. Death is, literally, following you."

Harry spat angrily onto the earth beneath him. "I guess there's a lot of business for him around me. As long as he stays out of my way...."

Ethan laughed hard, almost doubling over. "Oh, Harry," he managed. "You were always a defiant one."

"Leave me alone," Harry sighed, feeling the familiar aches in his tired and sore joints. Aches he had been carrying a lifetime as he battled to end this nightmare that had all started with a simple thought.

*What doesn't?*

"Suit yourself," Ethan shrugged, pulling his non-existent cloak around himself and disappearing faster than the blink of an eye.

Left alone now with nothing but his thoughts, Harry looked to the road ahead and tried to stop thinking of the road that lay behind - the one that had brought him so far. He prayed for the day when all of this would be nothing but a distant memory, when he could finally go home. Oddly enough, he was really looking forward to a butterbeer and a chocolate frog - or a feast in the Great Hall.

He laughed out loud at the empty land, disturbing nothing but the wildlife, and wiped a tear from his shining emerald eye.

\*~\*~\*~\*

*"Why do you continue on this quest?" the familiar and sometimes accusing voice said from behind a veil of darkness. A seething storm cloud of grey smoke barring its true form. The voice did not sound male or female, but a mix of both.*

*Harry looked down at the chess board before him, and with a thought sent the bishop to intercept the enemy knight. "I know nothing else now," he replied.*

*"Hmph!" the voice exclaimed, and claimed a pawn with its queen. "Isn't your soul tired? Don't you want eternal rest?"*

*Harry raised an eyebrow. "You mean death? I thought so. No, for many years I thought I did, but I'm over that. I want to live, and face life as it comes."*

*"Knowing what you know, do you believe that's possible?" Queen to attack bishop...*

*Harry paused in a moment of reflection before speaking. "We'll see, won't we. Check."*

*"Ha, good show, Potter. You've improved over the last decade tremendously."*

*Harry nodded. "Who are you?" he asked, as his knight was consumed by the king.*

*"Just another life form, struggling to survive life - I live in a separate dimension to you though and, before you, had no interest in the mortal human realms."*

*"Why me?" Harry asked.*

*The seething storm cloud laughed deeply. "You cannot guess? No... why it is because of your story, never has there been another like it... and for it to fall on a human. Simply impossible, and yet there you sit in front of me. Closer to the Ways of Twilight than any other creature has ever been."*

*"I'm nothing special...." Harry grumbled, the chess game forgotten. "Just in the wrong place at the wrong time. You don't know what I would give to have just lived a life of peace, and comfort... not have to change it all and live again, back home. Christ...."*

*The cloud shook and Harry felt its displeasure. "You have had one hundred years to think about this, and still you do not see what beings high above you knew when you defeated the demon Allarius! Your race is proud, but slow...."*

*"Explain it to me then," Harry spat, stroking his beard. "What don't I see?"*

*The cloud relaxed almost visibly, and softly said, "That you, Harry Potter, that humans... if you were not so constantly challenged to merely survive, you would have died out billions of millennia ago. You excel when facing adversity, and would perish in this peace and comfort you long for."*

*Harry sighed deeply, drawing a new breath after he did. "Is that really how we are seen by other races?"*

*"It is how you, and many other defiant human heroes, are seen. You are a shining example of the potential in your species. A lot of us other races are just beginning to realise that."*

*\*~\*~\*~\**

"D'you remember that world with the people that wanted to make you their king? And you said no," Ethan asked, breaking out into fits of laughter. "You had to steal a horse and get out of there before they tried to hang you for treason."

Harry sniggered. "What about that one where I was mistaken for the 'Prophet of God',' he said. "They wanted to build a golden statue of me hundreds of feet high. I had queens and peasant girls lining up out the door to marry me."

Ethan ran a hand through his hair and looked up at Harry on the horse, tears of mirth in his eyes. "You said no to a lot of girls over the years. Still holding out for Ginny and hope at the Ways?"

Harry raised an eyebrow and he smiled slightly. "Can you think of another reason a red blooded Englishman like my good self would stay a virgin for *one hundred and seventeen years*?"

Ethan chuckled. "Yeah, you got me beat there," he said, and then sobered up, staring straight into Harry's eyes. "You're a good person, Harry, never let anyone tell you different."

"I'm an asshole," Harry shrugged, and they fell into silence brought on by one hundred years of companionship. Eventually, Harry said, "What about that world with the gateway inside a live volcano. I had to throw myself into it and... aim."

"That was a close one," Ethan agreed. "But not as close as the gateway inside of a nest of Nundu. You had to hold your breath for three minutes and tip toe around them." He laughed. "It's all funny now, when we look back on it...."

"It'll be all funny when I'm telling Ron and Hermione about it. I'm thinking of buying a pensieve when I get back. What'd you think the interest will be on twenty millions galleons lying untouched for a century? Think I can afford a pensieve?"

Ethan sighed. "You gonna tell them about," he waved around before him, "all this," he managed. "*Everything!* I find it hard to believe, and I'm a disembodied soul living inside of your head."

Harry gazed forward whilst stroking his horse's mane gently. "They'll believe me. Whether I show it to them or not they'll believe. The better question is, *should* I tell them? They worry about me, always worry about me. This could hurt them... I don't want that."

Ethan shrugged. "The long and short of it is, Harry, we don't know what is going to happen at the Ways. If the Guardian was correct, then maybe you can do absolutely anything. You could make yourself forget all of this... but then you may be doomed to repeat it all. That's a catch and a half."

Harry gazed up at the night sky and shrugged. As always, his golden scar link stretched on unerringly north. It had been pulsing strangely



over the last few days, and that meant they were growing close to the gateway.

"No, I shouldn't forget. Time travel can be a paradox though. I think... I think that it'll all make sense at the Ways. If I can do whatever I want, then there shouldn't be any problems."

Ethan began to fade, disappearing back into Harry's mind. "Hope for the best, Harry...." he began.

"But prepare for the worst," Harry finished. "You stay out of trouble, kid."

Ethan snorted. "Don't let the horse kick you on the way out."

Harry rode on through the warm night in silence for the next few hours. The moon swam overhead and from a distance he was just a dark silhouette always on the horizon. The lone rider travelling ever onward towards his future. The last hero, the Boy Who Lived, the Darkslayer on a quest for tomorrow.

Eventually, and as it had done thousands of times before, the fiery circle of light stood blazing before him in the night sky. At this stage Harry didn't even give it a second look before leading his horse through. The animal snorted and hesitated only once before it stepped into another world.

Behind Harry the gateway sealed with a zipping sound, and he felt a chill that was completely unrelated to the cold night air.

"Are you there?" he asked the empty night, gazing around out of the corners of his eyes. He glared. "I have a job to do... stay out of my way."

The wind howled and a dozen loose dry leaves swirled up and around Harry's still form. Angrily, Harry lashed out at them with a thought and they fell burning to the ground. It seemed for a moment that the air was laughing at him, but it was over so quick he thought he could have imagined it.

*Yeah, hope for the best, Harry, Ethan said carefully. Spit in the devil's eye and see who has the last laugh.*

That night, Harry made camp within a concealed grove of fir trees and slept through till dawn as if he didn't have a care in the world. Perhaps he didn't, perhaps it was beyond even that at this point.

Woodland gave way to a mountain range and then finely to a sea plain during the following week. Harry rode most of the time, spoke little and hunted for food whenever he needed to. There were no signs of civilisation, but a feeling of something ... something... *big* had been growing inside of his stomach with every step taken.

*Soon, he thought. I'm so close I can taste it.*

Over the years, Harry had given a lot of thought about what it would be like to eventually look upon the Ways of Twilight, and what the Ways themselves would actually look like. Would he follow a set of stone stairs to a pedestal, a control panel at the summit? Would it be made of his memories, or resemble an entire world? He did not know, but was within miles of finding out. He knew it, so close after all this time.

"You feel it, don't you?" Harry whispered, and Ethan stirred in his mind.

Yes, was the single worded reply. Nothing more needed to be said, not after all this time. Some feelings could not be transcribed using words, if at all.

Harry led the horse down onto the sandy beach, ocean waves crashing endlessly against the shore. As far as he could see now it was ocean in every direction and a long white beach that hadn't been touched before ever. Harry was the first to walk upon this world. The sun shone through thin stratus cloud overhead and a few seabirds circled the lonely hero.

Anticipation and nerves grew in Harry's stomach and it seemed to get warmer with every foot he moved along the beach, following the scar link that was *thrumming* with power. Its time had come.

But it wasn't that easy - never that easy.

Behind him, Harry felt a chill, and turned in time to see the clear blue sky miles away thicken with black storm clouds. Lightning forked down upon the earth and a sheet of thick hail and rain fell out over the ocean. It wasn't natural and it was *moving*.

"Now who do you reckon is responsible for this?" Ethan asked mockingly, glaring at the raging storm as it moved ever closer. It was snowing now, and the warmth of a moment ago was forgotten as snow, yes snow, began to sweep in off the ocean. Harry shivered and wrapped his cloak closer around himself. The horse was terrified, eyes white and shaking between Harry's legs.

Turning around again, Harry saw the line of the sun and warmth slowly fading up the beach, and knew this would be a bid for it all, after all the years, it came down to a race against Death. Hadn't it always been?

"You think we can outrun it?" Harry asked. "I think we can. Let's go, horse."

It was cold now, and there was a shape in the clouds of a dark figure hooded and cloaked. Harry looked up, it was like gazing at a Dementor, and shivered. It seemed as if a strand of the dark cloud was pointing at him, marking him for death... *Death*.

The game was, without a doubt, afoot.

Kicking his heels into the horse's sides hard, the animal whinnied and jumped back on its hind legs as lightning forked the sky and the weather fell so cold that the actual ocean began to freeze further back down the beach. Grasping the reins, Harry bolted forward on the horse with all the fury of the damned behind him.

"CATCH ME IF YOU CAN!" he roared defiantly. When was it not defiance?

The sand began to freeze and crack behind Harry as his horse churned through the compact powder and raced for the fading light and warmth up ahead. The waves on his left began to freeze before

they even crashed and that was a sight he had never seen before. It was strangely beautiful.

*YEEHAW!* Ethan roared, laughing insanely. Harry grinned and joined him.

A few lightning forks had pulled ahead of Harry now and it was as if some higher being had dropped a curtain blocking his way, as bolt upon bolt impacted against the sand ahead. Harry continued to grin and raised one hand which began to glow, whilst still grasping the reins tightly with the other.

Attracted to the power in his hand, dozens of lightning strikes struck Harry's raised arm and he *grasped* them, unbelievably, and with a cry dispelled them back up into the sky. He shook his head and could smell his hand burning. No matter, pain didn't faze him. It would take a lot more than that, anyway.

Snow whipped around the horse and hail the size of footballs began to fall. With a thought Harry called a shield charm into existence around the two of them and tied it off to follow them along the beach. Above him, the face in the clouds roared against his unwillingness to submit. This just pushed Harry on harder, and faster.

The scar link was flickering now and bursts of warmth were shooting into his forehead in pulses from some unknown source further down the line. He was close, minutes away. God, all the long years, *one hundred of them*, and it came down to this. Surely his life would not end as a smoking crater on this empty beach.

He would live on, return home to March 20<sup>th</sup>, 1997 and pick up the pieces from there. He would be sixteen again, and everything would be back to normal. He could even go to Hogwarts if he wanted to. Home... home... home...

"HOME!" he roared.

Placing his free hand on the horse's mane, Harry poured energy into the animal and its legs took on a new life, churning up the sand and increasing its speed beyond its capabilities. Harry gritted his teeth and kept pouring energy into the animal. Behind him the beach

blurred and he pulled clear of the snowstorm that was chasing him, he fought through the curtain of lightning strikes and avoided a surge of unfrozen sea water.

And then there was warmth. Blissful, real warmth that the cold could not penetrate. He was in the middle of nowhere lost upon one of the infinite worlds within the string of Existence that belonged to the mortals. He was lost, and yet he had found *everything*.

Roses, pure and white, sprang up by the millions around him and the beach and ocean faded away to nothing as a green field bursting with white roses bloomed to life. The dark sky became clear and blue with a warm sun shining down upon this place of beginning, upon the first stitch within the thread of Creation.

Harry stood within the cornerstone of Existence, upon the thread that held everything together, and it was beyond beautiful. More than he could ever have imagined as his horse came to a skidding stop and he was thrown from it at over two hundred miles per hour. He hit the ground hard but there was no pain, no injury, not here.

Sitting up he gazed around in disbelief at the roses that bloomed into Existence before wilting and blooming again. An endless loop. Above all else, there was that feeling in his stomach that spoke of something bigger than all this, that lay just over the next rise.

He got to his feet, patted the horse a final, thankful, time and began to walk. Inside of his head Ethan looked out of his eyes in stunned silence. A lifetime of searching, a lifetime of war and fighting to attain one final, unimaginable goal. And they were there, together.

They stood where no other mortal, or anything else for that matter, had before. They stood at the Seat of the Creator, the Godhand, the Lost Dawn, the Ways of Twilight.

No sooner had he thought this than the blue sky faded brilliantly into the purple, orange azure of the twilight before dark. A few stars, circling worlds long forgotten and never known, winked in the sky.

Harry laughed, and felt aches and pains he had been carrying for decades wash away. For the first time in thirty years he flexed his

right hand completely without feeling a twinge of arthritis pain. His kneecaps no longer cracked and he twisted his neck without strain.

It was then that he realised he was crying, and had been for minutes.

He stroked the white roses once, their dew wiping away on the tips of his old fingers and the world seemed to sing when he did.

"It was just there...." he breathed, not knowing quite what to feel. Could he, very soon, be home? The prospect made his knees shake and he laughed again.

A clean road of hard earth cut through the path of roses and Harry followed that for hours that faded into days. He felt neither tired nor hungry, lost or cold. One foot in front of the other and it was that way for three days before he met his last obstacle. The final challenge, the last chance to prove that he was, after everything, worthy.

Death stood barring the road up ahead, a white rose in a long thin skeletal hand, his familiar scythe resting in the crook of his arm on the other. Without fear, Harry approached the dark figure... gliding along the ground purposely. He stood tall, like a man, like he was supposed to.

*Be very careful, Ethan warned. Be beyond very careful.*

<Potter> a voice said without fault, and Harry came to a stop before the figure of Death ten feet away. <Potter>

"Death," Harry whispered. Their words carried well across the twilight sky. "You look...."

<As you expect me to> The hooded figure before him didn't move, didn't breath. Harry could not see its face but he was willing to bet that its lips hadn't moved either. It was just a physical representation of what shrouded all of us.

Our deaths follow us everywhere, and claim us when the time is right. No reason, no arguing, no end can change that. *We are all doomed that path to tread.* And yet, death may be the greatest of all human

blessings. Everything in life is all the more richer if you know that one day, no matter who you are, you will die and leave it all behind.

"I have a destiny ahead of you," Harry said, unmoving. He did not summon his power. There was no fighting this battle, if indeed it was a battle.

*Some things are more important than life or death...*

The figure was silent and the wind blew around the two of them. So close to everything, so close to it all.

"I'll just be on my way then...."

<You cannot pass, Harry James Potter.>

As if that had been the sign, Harry's eyes grew hard and his jaw was set in a familiar way that had led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of dark creatures. With a thought the sword of Gryffindor appeared in his outstretched right hand, glittering in the twilight. That blade was coated in the blood of millions.

<You were right. There is no fighting this battle.>

"I will not be stopped, not after all the long years. Stand aside," he finished in a low growl, and the entire earth beneath their feet shook.

<Mortal you are, and your time has come. Nothing can change that.>

"My sword says otherwise," Harry said, but his heart wasn't in it. "I have to go on... I'm a survivor."

Death smiled, Harry was sure of it. <Not anymore.>

Harry blinked and suddenly the hooded figure was not so far away. He was right before him, and he screamed and fell to his knees as the rusty scythe of Death pierced his heart, plunging through his flesh and armour. He gasped, it was so cold. He felt his life draining away.

"No...."

<Countless have joined the otherworld because of your interference in the Balance of right and wrong, of good and evil, of chance and choice. You will not change that and return those souls to the mortal plain! They are mine and so they shall stay!>

The sword of Gryffindor clattered uselessly to the ground and Harry felt numb. He was there, he was within a day's walk of the Ways of Twilight and yet *here* is where his quest would end. Countless dead, worlds and universes destroyed and for what... nothing, in the very end.

"You...." he began, feeling the cold spread down his body and to his toes. "You cannot take me before my time... *that* is disturbing the Balance."

<Sacrifices must be made. Death has to be appeased. It is the way everything works. You are not immortal, and have meddled in the fabric of Existence for the last time.>

"This is not right!" he exclaimed, life force fading fast. From the hole in his chest a deep silver light had begun to shine, and Harry knew it was his soul.

*The Soul of the Hero.*

"NO!"

Harry stood with a roar, his final defiance, and grasped the rusty blade in his chest with both hands. Giving a cry of fury, he pulled the scythe out of his chest and the silver light spread across his body. The figure of Death stumbled back. The rules had been broken again, and the consequences no longer mattered.

<YOU ARE IMPOSSIBLE!>

That voice, the voice of Death, was neither male nor female. It simply was.

<YOU MUST DIE!>



"Not anymore...." Harry said serenely, his essence stretching across his skin. "Perhaps not ever."

<That light... *the light*... ordained by the Creator, sought after for eternity. You are not immortal!>

Harry began to walk forward, past Death and onwards to what was rightfully his destiny. "No I'm not... It's just not my time. You cannot change that... I'm sorry."

<One hundred and seventeen years you have escaped me... I will not allow it again. Harry James Potter, your *soul* is mine.>

Harry staggered as the skeletal fingers of Death clutched at the silver liquid spreading over his body. Flickers of light fell from it and it seemed, as he watched, that a flow of the silver soul light trickled into the fingers of Death. He frowned.

"What does that mean?" His voice had taken on a high, almost ethereal tone. The very heavens spoke through him. He was calm and in control. This was his life and destiny - he had fought through hell to win it and win it he would.

<A promise, Harry James Potter. A promise.> Death clenched his hand and the silver light was extinguished in his grasp. Harry gasped and almost fell. <You are not immortal. One day you will die, and I will guide you across to the otherworld. There you will face judgement. Your soul will burn!>

"So be it," Harry whispered, thinking of all the life and all the wrongs he had to set right by changing time. It was worth it. He already knew his soul was damned anyway. Why not get it in proverbial writing? "Don't be a stranger now, Death."

<There will come a time, Darkslayer, when it will be not only wrong, but useless, to resist me. It is simply the way of life. Remember that, even if you remember nothing else. For without it, I fear you will become what you have sworn to destroy.>

And with that, reality twisted in a flash of light, and Harry lay upon the road alone, his hand clutching his chest and face set in a grimace of

pain. The fingers of his other hand brushed the glowing ruby of his sword - which was, after all, a part of him.

A long time seeped by and nothing happened. The only witnesses were the stars and the twilight sky.

*I think you passed the test...* Ethan grimaced eventually, soothing Harry. *Shall we move on?*

Harry merely nodded. He rose back on the road and did not speak another word this side of destiny, of time. He did not speak again before the end, which even now his fingers were curling around.

So much he had had to endure, so much he had overcome. It was true; he thrived against adversity and would perish in comfort. So cold, so real, that was life. It was also true that he had cheated death - Death - broken the fundamental law of nature that all creatures had to adhere to. Was he the first to do so? It didn't matter, he didn't care. Everything was almost finished.

After a time that could have been days or years, it didn't matter anymore, the roses on either side of the road began to thin, and then finally disappear altogether. Harry looked back at one point, just after the last rose fell from sight and could not see a single petal anywhere. It was as if they had never been....

The road went on though, as roads usually do, and Harry topped a rise some hours later to find himself face to face with a phantom from his past. Allarius stood at the top of the hill, silent and unmoving. His eyes of fire burned strongly and his charred flesh let off thin tendrils of smoke. In his hand was the lone curved black sword that he had stabbed Harry with one hundred years ago.

Harry did not even spare him a second glance, and walked through the memory without blinking. Allarius was just the first of many, many memories though.

Vampires and Death Eaters, all of his enemies. Dark humans, demons and creatures that shouldn't exist lined either side of the road for miles ahead. Every one of Harry's conquered enemies stood

silently by the road, staring without thought at the man who had destroyed them.

Harry moved on, the only sound his footfalls, and gave up counting his foes at seven thousand - most of them vampires and creatures similar. Hours he walked with the eyes of the dead upon him and not once did they move or did he reach out to touch one. They were memories, that was all, eyes to follow him as he completed his century old quest.

The lines of the dead stretched on beyond sight, and after a while Harry found himself walking with his eyes cast to the ground, unable or perhaps not wanting to look at his body count. He felt no remorse though, unless it was over what he had had to do. They all came looking for a fight, never once did he take it to them.

At long last, and after many hours, the last thousand or so phantom memories faded away, and it was only then that Harry realised he had not seen the one enemy that should count. Tom Marvolo Riddle - Lord Voldemort.

*His* Voldemort, the one from his own world. The man who was more snake than human, with blood red eyes and pale skin, slits for nostrils and an air of evil surrounding him. Every other conceivable enemy in existence had been there, staring accusingly from the side of the road... but not Lord Voldemort. Harry had not defeated him.

*Everything has an opposite, and Dark was frequently balanced by Light.*

It was Ron first, and why shouldn't it be? Ron had been his first friend. Ronald Weasley, sixteen year old Ron Weasley stood smiling by the side of the road, in place of where his enemies had stood before. Seeing him there actually made Harry pause, but he moved on without a word.

Hermione followed, Hermione Granger. She smiled at him also, dressed as she was in her Hogwarts uniform. Perhaps that was what she had died in? Harry moved on, giving her only a glance. Then it got harder.

Ginny was next, and Harry stopped when he came to her. She was standing there without a care and smiling at him, holding her hand forward for him to take it. Her deep brown eyes were filled with such love that it actually made Harry smile. He reached forward, intending to take her hand, but was not surprised when his own slipped through it.

She was a phantom, a memory, they all were.

Friends he had known over his long life stood beside the road smiling now. Dumbledore and the Weasleys, Remus Lupin and Sirius Black, James and Lily Potter, even Michael and Melissa, his brother and sister from another world, were there. His friends in Gryffindor and at Hogwarts as a whole made an appearance. Then their numbers started to thin, and those he knew as friends was a much shorter walk than those he knew as enemies.

Tarishma stood by the road, dressed in her armour and a hand upon her sword. She nodded to him and he nodded back. Sarah Wingfield, the nurse who had been his first companion on a long list of companions, stood in her hospital uniform and smiled. She had been the first to die on his true quest for the Ways of Twilight.

Then followed the others; men, women and sometimes children who had taken up with him on the long march to the end. Never living or staying with him longer than a few months. Their number soon dwindled to nothing and Harry was left alone on an empty and utterly barren road that, of course, continued onwards.

Wherever he was and whenever he was, Harry felt as though he was approaching the end. Everything rested on the blade of a razor, and his final choices here will decide it all. Eventually, and without much preamble, Harry Potter came upon a door in the middle of the road.

It was a simple door, made of wood and possessing an iron handle fashioned in the image of a lion. It stood in the ground on hinges that were latched to the air and it was completely bare. One hundred years, and it came down to opening a door. Harry did, without hesitation, and the door swung on its hinges... no that wasn't right...

With his hand still on the handle, *Existence swung around the door*, and Harry went dizzy for a moment and then he was standing upon a glowing pedestal in a room that was showered in starlight. He couldn't say where he was, or how he had got here, but he was there and that was all that mattered now.

An overwhelming sense of awe filled Harry as he gazed around at the room surrounding him, if indeed it was a room. Maybe, like Death, he was seeing what he expected to see and nothing more. The walls that could have been the sky were dotted with billions of stars, all the stars, and dark water sloshed up against the edge of his pedestal.

It was then that it all made sense, at long last, and Harry knew he had arrived at... *Time*.

It was the Stream that slapped against his floating glowing pedestal, it was Time that lay beneath him in an ongoing river that only flowed one way. But here he was, standing above it. He was outside of time, outside of all the laws of nature.

He was at the Ways of Twilight, and with a thought could do absolutely anything.

Harry smiled.

He had been waiting one hundred years for this moment, following the scar link which still stretched on even here. It would lead all the way back to his own world in time, back to whatever destruction had occurred there and probably come across Voldemort. Whether it would be Voldemort's corpse or whether he was still alive was something Harry would never know the answer to.

Without waiting a moment longer, Harry did what he had come to do. Nothing else mattered... absolutely nothing. He closed his eyes, felt the power of this place, so different and so greater than his own, and thought of home. Beneath his feet the pedestal shuddered and then he was moving.

Faster than light or sound, faster than anything, Harry was whipped and swirled *back* down the Stream, back down time and it was the simplest thing in the world. He remembered the day he had first left

his own world, standing in a clearing beside Ginny as the first gateway into the Boundary tore apart the sky and threatened to engulf his entire world. In the end, it had been a good choice to step into the hole and stop the destruction. He was about to do it again, but with different memories this time. Oh yes, time waited for no one.

But then... Time did not flow in the Boundary. Would the Guardian, Godric Gryffindor, recall all of this? Would he remember what had happened? Harry did not know, but was about to find out.

Ahead loomed a staircase that led up higher above the Stream, and it was here that his floating pedestal took him. At one point Harry looked down into the dark water he moved through and that one look was almost enough to destroy him. He saw into time, saw it stretching back beyond imagination and how it effected and changed everything. He saw infinite.

Silently, the pedestal came up alongside the stone stairs that shone with a faint radiance and Harry stepped onto the bottom one. It shone with a rainbow of colour as he did, and the next step followed. The air was full of phoenix song as he climbed the stairs and he felt lighter than a feather. He was crying again, but didn't know it. Tears of joy streamed down his face and got caught in his long flowing beard.

At the top of the stairs everything changed again, and he found himself standing in a room similar to the one that led to the Department of Mysteries in the Ministry. A circular stone room with ten doors aligned around him. All polished nicely and standing like sentinels, hiding the truth about life and everything.

Harry did not know quite what to do anymore, and it was then that he saw the black leather bound book lying on the floor in the centre of the room, covered in dust and screaming out to him to be picked up.

Harry's heart skipped a few beats as he stumbled over to the book and picked it up with shaking hands. He did not need to see the golden lettering on the cover to know what this was, or wonder how it had got here. Anything was possible.

A single tear fell from his eye and onto the journal, cutting a line through the decades of dust and washing away the memories. Harry sighed and ran his fingers along the golden letters of the title;

### *Everlasting Thoughts*

He sighed. This was a journal he had bought a century ago in Hogsmeade, as a present for someone special. Time had moved on and everything had changed but this remained - at the centre point of creation this had made its way here. Harry knew he was supposed to find it, that destiny was reaching out through the age towards him.

*Everlasting Thoughts... Everlasting...*

*Love was everlasting - a truth, but not the truth.*

Ginny's diary. He held Ginny's diary.

\*~\*~\*~\*

## Chapter 30 - There Are Still No Happy Endings

*'No one ever does live happily ever after, but we leave the children to find that out for themselves.'*

*~~ Roland, The Last Gunslinger*

Thoughts long forgotten swirled through Harry's mind as he fell to the stone floor in the Ways of Twilight, to the stone floor in the centre point of Creation. He remembered buying this diary he now held in his hands, along with Christmas presents for Ron and Hermione. An advanced Transfiguration book for Hermione, if he remembered correctly.

It had to be here for a reason, nothing happened without a reason. Not for him. He had to read it, that was the reason. What would it say? Did he dare flick through the pages? Would it tell him how his friends had died?

Harry did not know, wasn't sure he wanted to know, but with care he opened the journal, which groaned and ached as he did, dust raining off it in spades, looking for a date that held special significance.

*March 20<sup>th</sup>, 1997*

The page was blank, completely and utterly. Harry supposed it should be - Ginny would have been in no mood to write the day he was torn from the only universe that mattered. Slowly, with his old hands, Harry turned the page, and then the next one. His hands were shaking.

This page did have faint writing on it, written in a curly script he recalled was Ginny's.

*You're gone.*

*It's been two days. Two long days of nothing but suffocating silence and regret. The castle is so quiet and the atmosphere so tense.*

*I miss you.*



*I don't know if you're coming back or if you're even alive, but I have to believe that you are. You survived the curse again Harry. You have done what no one in the history of our world has ever managed to do and, while the curse didn't kill you, you still may be dead.*

*Please don't be dead, Harry. Please.*

*I grew up on stories of your bravery, of your courage and defeat of You-Know-Who, of Voldemort. It was your mother's love that saved you that awful night so many years ago, your mother's love that first allowed you to challenge the power of evil and live. It wasn't of your own making that you had to face him, Fate decided that for you, but you faced it admirably and with more heart than anyone could ever hope to ask for.*

*I don't know why I'm writing this.*

*I love you, Harry. Isn't that enough? I fell in love with your legend, but over the years, you became more than The Boy Who Lived to me. You became just Harry. You were just Harry. Not the person the world sees, not the legend. But real and strong. I watched you struggle silently over the long years, one life altering trial to the next, and yet you still survived.*

*I saw the burden you carry grow until it seemed you were walking with a hunch. You were too young to carry that burden, to have the weight of the entire world placed unfairly upon your shoulders... but you faced it with the same will to survive and heroism as you showed in that clearing only two days ago. I realised that you were too young to carry it, but you were the only one with the strength and heart to do so.*

*I love you, Harry. But you're gone and I don't know if you're coming back.*

Harry smiled and sighed, turning the page for the next entry. It held a newspaper clipping of the Daily Prophet, the first issue after he disappeared.

***Harry Potter's Final Repose?***

*Written by Ian Lyterman*

*It seems the world once again owes its peace to a boy only sixteen years of age. Forever the savior and protector of the people, Harry Potter has once again shown his great worth and fought the Dark Lord in a duel that may have led to the young hero's death.*

*Following the devastating events of March 20<sup>th</sup>, the Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry has informed the Prophet of Mr. Potter's courageous and undeniable noble sacrifice.*

*Harry Potter. The world should be used to hearing that name by now. A boy who has now twice survived the Killing Curse, slain a basilisk, faced down Dementors and dueled the Dark Lord. Whenever and wherever extraordinary and dangerous events have taken place, one found our hero.*

*But weep, for Harry Potter may have paid the ultimate price for our protection. While hundreds of Aurors from a handful of the world's Ministries battled the Dark Lord's forces in the village of Hogsmeade, the real battle for our very world took place in a far more sinister and hopeless place.*

*Harry Potter and the Dark Lord dueled almost to the death in a hidden clearing within the Forbidden Forest as the Aurors and Death Eaters clashed. Unbeknownst to them, had Harry Potter lost that duel, they would all have perished and Hogwarts castle would have fallen.*

*He Who Must Not Be Named summoned an ancient power to devour Hogwarts and the surrounding area. Through his courage and audacity, Harry Potter once again survived the Dark Lord's Killing Curse and succeeded in ending the slaughter that day. You-Know-Who retreated after Potter almost destroyed him. The remaining Death Eaters fled as their master did. We are all*

*familiar with the battle of that day, what we did not know is why it ended.*

*Before I write any further I think it should be appreciated that our world possesses only a handful of extraordinary men and women. Truly extraordinary people that rise above the rest of us and do what is right for the world. We admire these people. We admire Harry Potter. These people are so selfless, sometimes deadly, that there are moments when our history, and our present, leaps forward into the future on the backs of these amazing people.*

*Harry Potter sacrificed himself. He stepped into a void of darkness, into the abyss created by the Dark Lord. He closed a magical portal that had the force to rip away the foundations of Hogwarts castle. With no thought to his own well being, he saved us all with one of the greatest acts of heroism our world has ever known.*

*A world-wide search began today for Harry Potter, who has neither been seen nor heard of since his disappearance. After beating back the most evil Dark Lord to have ever existed, and saving the lives of over a thousand, has Harry Potter finally succumbed? Was his sacrifice the ultimate one, or is he still fighting out there? Somewhere between worlds and time is our savior still alive...?*

*The facts and magic say he isn't, but I believe that the amazing life and story of Harry Potter will not end this way. A boy who was ruled by prophecy, but rebelled against Fate, cannot be so easily defeated by sacrifice or death.*

Harry shook his head, reading the words now a century dead. So much had happened since this, he hadn't returned to the world like both Ginny and this reporter he hadn't known hoped. In the reporters

case it had almost been a foregone conclusion - he was Harry Potter, and he would come back to fight the Dark Lord.

It hadn't happened, not in this nightmare reality - where anything and everything was possible. Hell, it would all be over soon.

Harry carefully turned the old pages over the next few hours or so, reading and absorbing every word Ginny wrote. She was constant in her belief, which she strengthened into truth, that he was alive somewhere, that he would come back. She had been half right, at least.

At this point Harry was grateful that he hadn't died lost somewhere, rotting in a ditch, and that he had made it to this point in his life, when he had a chance to fix it. He was anxious to do so, but first he would finish reading.

*Ron and Hermione have gotten a lot closer since you disappeared, Harry. I think they need each other to hold on to now. Hermione's parents are coming to stay at the Burrow for Easter, and then Professor Dumbledore is going to increase the wards on their home.*

*You Know Who hasn't been heard from in weeks, which is a good thing I suppose, perhaps you killed him? We can only hope!*

He turned the pages back and forth. It was an enchanted book and the pages were infinite.

*You've been gone a few months and the Death Eater attacks have started up again. Just a few but they're getting more and more frequent. A lot of them leave your name written in the blood of the victims. I think Voldemort is calling you out, thinks maybe that we're hiding you. I wish we were.*

*Dad is working hard at the Ministry to build up the Auror numbers for the war everyone knows is starting up again. Many have fled the country but France has also stepped up its recruitment. The International Confederation is acting slowly, most nations still not wanting anything to do with dark wizards, but Dumbledore is doing*

*his best. I think he really takes your absence hard, Harry. It shows, he looks ancient.*

The pages got progressively darker from there and more than once Harry thought he could make out tear stains on the pages, from where the ink had run. He touched them and shuddered. The war did come back and for months both sides fought viciously in small skirmishes, neither side attacking openly like they had done in Hogsmeade.

Then, in one entry, Harry read the worst. Voldemort attacked the Ministry with five hundred Death Eaters. It had fallen and hundreds had died, including one or two Weasleys and most of the Order.

Ginny had written in the diary distraught and broken. Seeing the date as August 17<sup>th</sup>, 1997, Harry filed that away. He didn't think it would matter, but if he had knowledge beforehand of the Ministry attack then it could help when he returned.

Then the effects of his adventures through space began to appear in Ginny's diary. She wrote of strange weather and of unnatural occurrences happening all over the world. Earthquakes and massive storms across entire continents, weird black roses springing up everywhere and Voldemort increasing his war effort.

Eventually, and after many hours, the entries into the diary just stopped. On one page there was a brief paragraph from Ginny saying that Hogwarts was being fortified with magical wards against the weather, but it wasn't enough. And then nothing.

The date had been September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1997, and he supposed that Ginny had died sometime after that. She had stopped writing for some reason, that must be it. Allarius had come to his world sometime after that day, whilst he was unconscious in another hospital wing on another world with Nundu poisoning.

Harry rose and dropped the diary, contemplating silently the information he had learned. Dates of attacks and where Voldemort would attack. It would be invaluable if, after he returned to his own world, his return was kept secret. No, he was thinking too far ahead.

He was not home yet and he still had to get there, however he was supposed to do that.

Ten doors stood around Harry in this room that was probably pulled from his memories of the Department of Mysteries. The doors spun as he looked at them and Harry wondered which, if any, he was supposed to go through. Leaving it to fate, he limped over to the closest door. There was a single word written upon it:

### ***Knowledge***

That was all. Curious, Harry touched the word and was instantly standing in a library so huge and amazing that he fell to the floor in surprise, crying out at the amount of literature that suddenly surrounded him. Book shelves several hundred feet high surrounded him, trolleys filled with books and stacks laying haphazardly around were just everywhere. Billions, trillions, every book ever written in any subject across any world within any time period was there.

His first thought was that Hermione would love to be here, his second was that he hoped she never was - not if she had to follow the same road he had to get here.

Harry stood up and gazed with shining eyes at the repository of knowledge around him. He knew instinctively, without a doubt, that anything he ever wanted to know about anything and everything could be found in this room. He could learn secrets about magic, read life histories on any being that ever lived, learn about power and how to use it, how to govern and fight war. Anything - he could even find out how the Chudley Cannons did in the Quidditch league the year he left.

Thoughts and ideas swirled through his mind at the possibility, along with the knowledge that he had infinite time to explore this place. He wouldn't age, wouldn't need food or sleep in this place. It was like the blueprints for Existence, the skeleton the body was built around. Beyond belief - he was in the library of God, but that being Himself was nowhere to be found.

Still, anything he could want to learn would be here. And what did he want to learn? The secret to world peace, how to cure disease or

famine? It didn't matter; he would spend some time here and see where it took him. Oh yes, he would have to. The possibilities to use this against Voldemort were too great to be ignored.

Harry disappeared into the stacks of books, and didn't come out for a very long time.

\*~\*~\*~\*

Stepping lightly back into the room with ten doors, Harry smiled as he stood before the **Knowledge** door. Time had no meaning here so he couldn't say how long he had spent in the Library, but it hadn't been mere hours or days. He knew things now, things no one anywhere in his world, or another world he had visited, knew. And in time he would put that to great use.

But enough was enough. He had seen now and done his fair share of life to know when it was time, even if time wasn't kept on a watch anymore. He had to get home, and that meant changing time. His thoughts had led him to this place and he had a suspicion on how to do what needed to be done. One of these doors would hold the word he needed.

In a clockwise direction, Harry began walking around the circular room, his boots tapping lightly on the stone. His head was bursting with the knowledge he knew and its uses. When he got back, however powerful Voldemort had become, it might not matter. Though if war had taught him anything, it was that even the best laid plans didn't last longer than the first five minutes of the battle.

The next door he came to said, **Stars**, so he walked past it. Not what he wanted, he didn't think, and a mystery. The next plain wooden door said, **Life**, again not what he wanted but it sparked his interest. What could it possibly hold? He moved on, not caring anymore. This was not the place for him anymore - he had to leave. He felt that strongly in his gut.

The next seven doors read as followed:

**Fate**

***Emotion***

***Power***

***Sacrifice***

***Balance***

***Hope***

***Forgiveness***

And then Harry stood before the ***Knowledge*** door again, utterly confused and without a clue as to which door would lead him home. He was supposed to be in control, to be able to do anything here, but he was without hope now... had it all been for naught? Where was the door that should say, ***Time***?

He was suddenly very angry, and waves of power began to pulse around him. He was power, had a century of using and cultivating his strength and could topple worlds with a thought. Everything went hazy; the world seemed to scream before he put the power back on its leash. To destroy this place would mean the end of everything... he would have done Allarius' work for him.

But it wasn't fair. After so much time did it mean nothing that he couldn't change it. Where was the door that said *Justice* or *Fairness*. It didn't exist, never had.

That was when he turned away from the door of ***Knowledge*** and his eyes met with a final door that had appeared upon the ground where he had let fall Ginny's diary. It was another wooden door, suspended on nothing but air, but Harry knew these doors led on to the next place. Where he had to be next... it was not all for nothing.

He stepped over to it, expecting to see the word *Time* etched into it. He wasn't surprised when it didn't say time, but then nothing could surprise him anymore, but frowned at what it did say.



Upon this wooden door, within the centre of the room that led to all the building blocks of Existence, the heart of everything, Harry found a door that said, in clear blazing letters that were shining electric blue:

**Potter**

It was his name, it was his door. What did that mean? He didn't know, didn't particularly want to know. What would a door with his name written on it be doing here in the centre of the centre of Existence? He felt slightly queasy just thinking about it. He was connected to this somehow, to what needed to be done here. There were problems, and perhaps something that needed fixing. Was he being used by something higher than him to achieve something else's aims?

"I'm no one's pawn," he growled, and punched his name upon the door. It splintered, but not before it transported him to the beginning of a vast, high staircase that ascended up beyond his sight and reached towards a glowing light.

There were thousands of stairs, but, as Harry knew well, every journey began with but a single step, and that once he made the first step the rest would follow - however long it took. He could take the time to get there... patience was something life had taught him.

As he climbed the steps, he had the increasing feeling that this was what he was meant to do... and that he was being watched. A century of war had taught him to sense the feeling of another, but now he could feel nothing. And yet there was something watching him.

Bathed in light, Harry climbed the final few steps and stood upon a great cliff miles above a world that swirled and changed with a rainbow of colours, as if an artist painting it was doing so in layers. Harry thought, and instantly he knew his thought was correct, that he was seeing a world being born - one made from a choice of another world. It was incredible, a sight to remember.

Then there were the doors. Two of them, standing in the air again.

One said **Time**.

The other said....

## ***Destiny***

Almost against his will - almost - Harry floated over to the door on the right, the ***Destiny*** door, and ran his hands along the smooth wood, careful not to touch the word that would open the door and reveal to him, without a doubt, the destiny of everything.... the *purpose* of Existence.

For a long time in this life Harry had thought himself fearless, that he had seen and done enough to be completely unafraid of the unknown - of war and pain... and yet, here he was shaking uncontrollably before the ultimate Truth. He fell to his knees, fear coursing through his veins and wept.

He also felt a presence beyond this door.... *beyond **the** door...* and knew that should he open it, he would go mad. Completely and without mercy his mind would destroy itself. Ethan had been silent for many weeks but Harry could still feel him in there, despite his best efforts to get him to talk, the teenager seemed unwilling. There was something wrong.

The door, now that he got a closer look at it, wasn't as smooth and as *pure* as he had first thought. It was cracked in parts, hairline cracks that were almost invisible. It also seemed, around the edges, that a poison was eating away the wood. It was spotted and flecked with wood rot. Something was destroying the door, and Harry instinctively knew that it was Evil, his Evil in the scar link and that which had spawned Allarius.

Through this door lay hope, salvation, truth and the force that had created the universe. To find it behind a door that held his own name worried Harry, why should he lead the way to the Truth? But it also led the way home. For now he could not worry about the poison eating its way through the door, that was for another time, he knew, *when he returned to this place.*

Where had that thought come from?

Harry cried out in anguish as he had that thought, but he knew, just like he knew instinctively what was right and what was wrong, that he would return to this spot. Maybe not in this life, and not for many

years, but he would be back. It was *his* destiny. Whatever lay beyond this door... he would one day see. But for now, home would be enough.

Harry was still crying as he turned to face the second door, labelled **Time**, and pushed against the coarse wood with a blank mind. Shaking his head and wiping away the tears, he thought about what he wanted and the door fell away like a feather, revealing a world image that was familiar.

He thought of March 20<sup>th</sup>, 1997 - thought of the moment he had entered the first tear in reality, the one created by Voldemort, and there it was before him.

Standing in the Ways of Twilight, Harry looked through the door at the Forbidden Forest one hundred or so years ago. He saw himself, could almost reach through the door and touch himself, letting go of Ginny and turning towards the pulsing circle of light in the air.

Silently cursing that tear in reality, Harry knew that he had to catch himself just as he entered the circle... otherwise none of it would matter. He wouldn't know all of this and would never have left his own world to begin with. This way, he was outside of time when it was all returned to normal. He would be in the Boundary, and his mind would have time to adjust.

Still, Harry hesitated as he watched himself move slowly towards the gateway. This was him one hundred years ago, and Harry found himself sorry that the boy, who was him, was about to go through all of this life in an instant. He was about to destroy himself, and it could not be any other way.

He looked so... so *young* and innocent. Sixteen. He was sixteen there and barely alive. Blood ran down his arms from the sword wound in his shoulder. Voldemort had driven the sword of Gryffindor through his shoulder and he was magically exhausted. Despite that, the Harry he saw there had lived a normal life compared to what lay before him after he stepped into that break in reality.

*It wasn't fair, but Harry had long since accepted that.*

Maybe there was a God above, maybe there wasn't?! Perhaps life was what he made it, and the Universes, Existence, did what it could to survive - just like him. Harry had never been overly philosophical, but right now he wished he had an answer, the answer, that lay behind the door to his right. Behind ***Destiny***.

*Not yet*, a voice whispered in his mind, and Harry felt calm flow through him at the sound of that voice. *Not yet, Harry*.

*When?*

*In death*, was the voice's reply, and then it spoke no more.

Harry didn't have time to ponder that, as time was up. He controlled time now but it had run out, his other self that was visible through the doorway was about to step into the hole in reality, and start this madness all over again.

Not knowing what to expect, Harry, the old man, stepped through the doorway of ***Time*** and suddenly no longer had a body. He was floating, invisible and ethereal upon his own world again. Ginny stood looking at young Harry, himself, just now stepping into the darkness of the Boundary and could not see the floating, invisible old man that had just left the beginning of Creation.

To Harry the world was so fresh, so clean and so his that he almost forgot what he was doing. Outside of his body and floating in a different plain to himself, he glided across the air and towards his fast disappearing body before the hole in the sky. He floated above himself, and could hear thoughts in the air.

He heard himself thinking, *I'll be back soon, Gin. Just wait, I don't know where I'm going but I won't be gone long*.

Christ, it was an innocent thought. He was just a kid here, just a kid that was about to gain one hundred years of knowledge, and then some.

Harry reached out with his old hand, wrinkled and heavily scarred - there wasn't a part of him that wasn't - and gently touched the

shoulder of his younger self. *It was that simple, and in the end that hard.*

Gasping, Harry felt his entire soul pulled forward and fused into the body of the boy, his body, just as he stepped over the horizon of the Boundary gateway, and disappeared into eternity.

Both Harry's screamed as they became one. It was an agonising, heart wrenching, soul destroying scream that would shatter the strongest person's spirit.

Swirling in the Stream now faster and faster, plunged in ice cold water as he swam the Boundary - or was forced through it - young Harry began to change. The fragile sanity he had developed over one hundred years broke completely and he drooled and screamed, unaware of anything.

His body changed as well. The open bleeding wound in his shoulder healed over with scar tissue as if it had been healed for one hundred years. Across his body one or two new scars appeared, but only one or two. His glasses fell off his face and for a moment his left eye flickered between dazzling emerald green and rough pale green before settling back to emerald. The glasses had become useless though. He could see perfectly without them.

The Boundary surged and threw him through space in this timeless infinite dark place and now sixteen year old Harry felt one hundred and seventeen years of atrocious memories. Harry screamed his throat raw as he remembered wars and battles, death and violence, life and splendour, beginning and end. He remembered himself doing all these things; he was himself doing all these things.

It was Harry, changed and looking like a battered sixteen year old, but it was Harry.

*POTTER! Ethan Rafe roared in his mind. YOU CAN'T TAKE THIS! WE CAN'T TAKE THIS!*

It was true, Harry couldn't. One hundred years of anything suddenly being dumped into your head wouldn't be easy to take, but Harry had some of the worst memories ever - and they shattered his mind.

Still unaware that he was hurtling across the Boundary towards the Guardian, he cried out for death, for it to end. Nothing in all his years had ever been this painful. It was beyond it all. He wept.

His ears were full of the sounds of battles that would now never be fought. He saw wars he had led and enemies he had destroyed that would never be. He had done it, that was his last thought before it all went dark and he fell into unconsciousness.

He had done it.

\*~\*~\*~\*

*"Wake up, Harry,"* a voice said. *"Wake up."*

Harry moaned and his eyes flickered open and then closed again. His head hurt, his mind surging with memories that were his. He was sixteen again, his body was not overly scarred and he couldn't handle it. It was too much, he wanted to die now... but there was no death here.

A light floated before him in the darkness, a light of power and of understanding. It was the Guardian, but Harry only just remembered and grasped that memory.

"Gryffindor..." he moaned. "Guardian of... of Existence...."

*"Yes, Harry?"*

Tears streamed down Harry's cheeks and floated away in this place that held no gravity. He managed a few more words, "Kill me... please... please kill me...."

*"Do not give up now,"* the light said. *"You have done it, my boy. You have done what nothing on any level of Existence has ever done. You reached the Ways of Twilight - you saved Existence."*

"Too hard..." he managed. "Want... want... death...."

*"Not for you, Harry,"* the Guardian said. *"I am sorry, Darkslayer, but it isn't over."*

Harry saw the images of a thousand worlds flicker through his head uncontrollably. That was the worst part... he had absolutely no control whatsoever over his mind. He relived every moment of his quest in every instant and it hurt and pained him beyond belief. His face was twisted in constant agony.

He was still crying... so lost, so alone with nothing but his memories. It would have been merciful to kill him.

The Boundary lay outside of mortal time, so to Gryffindor it had been one hundred years since he had last seen Harry... and he knew now that if something wasn't done, the boy wouldn't survive long back in his own world, when he was sent there.

Unknowingly at the time, Gryffindor had sensed Harry's thoughts for a family and sent him on to that other world that was about to exist as a thriving life form once again. Neither of them could have anticipated the power and effect his link to Lord Voldemort would have had on Existence. Who could have? That it would eat through worlds and time to reach Harry was unthinkable, *it shouldn't have happened*.

*And yet it had.* The Guardian would give his existence to find out why it was allowed to happen as it did. Something *higher* had a hand in all of this, he was sure. But for what purpose? Gryffindor knew he would never understand the mind of a higher being, they saw things differently and on a greater scale. Strangely enough, so did Harry.

Maybe that was one of the reasons he had survived.

*"You must live, Harry," the Guardian said, sighing. "You must. There is something great afoot and you must be alive to meet it."*

Harry moaned and groaned, dry retching and choking. "Don't... care!"

The Guardian moved fast now, knowing what he had to do. He couldn't make anymore mistakes and something was telling him that Harry had to live. Around him millions of other mystic lights had appeared and they were watching Gryffindor silently.

The other Guardians from the far corners of Existence. They hadn't

wanted the boy to live and had almost destroyed Gryffindor after he let him go one hundred years ago. None of them believed he would reach and use the Ways of Twilight, and yet here he was again a hero. They all respected him, would give their lives for him. The feeling was felt by billions of others from different aspects of existence that didn't use time.

Tendrils of light that could be called arms stretched from the Guardian's glowing form, and he swept them around Harry's tossing head. The boy was dying whether he wanted it or not, destroying himself with his own memories. After all that had happened, this was not how he would die.

The memories were killing him, as was everything else. Harry had tried to absorb it all too fast into his younger self and now his mind was falling apart. It would look like a battlefield, or the aftermath at least where only the carrion eaters were left circling the dead. Gryffindor would make him forget for a time... it was the only way.

So now, as we reach the end, Godric Gryffindor, Harry Potter's ancestor, stroked the hair back from his forehead and revealed the lightning bolt shaped scar. It was glowing faintly silver. Ignoring that, the light of his 'arm' fell through the boy's skin and grasped at his mind.

*"You will forget it all, for a time, Harry," the Guardian said, his whole form shaking and sighing. It was how a Guardian wept. "But it will come back, and you will have to face it all again. Nothing can remain, I'm afraid, but we will trust in the kindness of our species, of humans, to take care of you until it does."*

"What....?" Harry began, but then it didn't matter.

The Guardian placed a block in his mind, a block of considerable strength that would give his mind time to sort out every memory he possessed - make it easier to accept. Unfortunately, he would forget almost everything he knew. Who he was, what he was, and where he was going. With the memory block in place, Harry's face faded of pain and a look of intense relief passed over it before the confusion came.



"Where am I?" he asked himself out loud.

*"With a friend," Gryffindor replied. "Now go home, Harry Potter. Whatever Destiny has in store for you I believe we have just reached the end of the beginning, and whatever put you through all of this can wait. It wasn't a happy ending, but that only means we are not finished yet."*

"I... can't see you," Harry whispered. "Who are you?"

*"Go now... go home."*

Millions of lights vanished as one and Harry screamed anew, alone and afraid of what was happening. He was moving, moving fast, that much he could tell but it was dark - darker than dark. There wasn't a light anywhere anymore.

*Who am I? Where am I going?*

Then there was light, and his flying form raced up to meet it with a speed that was faster than anything he knew could exist. *What happened? I feel... new.*

He was scared, but for some reason that feeling felt foreign to him. He didn't get scared, did he? He didn't know.

*Who am I?*

Light filled his vision. It was everywhere, all around him and all through him. He got the sense that something important had just happened, and that he had been at the centre of it. An image, final and brief, shimmered through his mind's eye. He saw someone... an old man... falling from a horse in a field of white roses.

That was it. Wind rose in his ears and he spun so fast he had to close his eyes. When he opened them again, a world had sprung to life around him.

*Home*, he thought... but it was dark.

He was lying on his back in sand, and overhead storm clouds were just bursting. Harry gasped as water rushed up his legs and along his back. He raised his head and saw an ocean, dark in reflecting the storm clouds. He lay on his back on the shoreline, his jeans bloody and soaked in seawater. His shirt... it was black and torn. It was also matted with blood from some fight he couldn't remember.

The tide receded but another wave crashed and he shivered in the cold. Lightning forked across the sky and thunder rumbled. The wind whipped harsh grains of sand along the beach in sand storms. It was dark. Why couldn't it be light?

Exhaustion had swept over Harry now. He was lost again, but home - that was what he felt. He didn't know who he was, where he was or what he had done to get here... and it was dark. And getting darker, he realised. His eyes were closing against his will.

One moment the shining emerald green blazed as they reflected a fork of lightning in the sky, the next they were closed and Harry lost consciousness. He was mumbling, mumbling the last memory he could recall. It was strange that it wasn't an image, but the words to a song that escaped his lips....

*"By the last breath of the fourth winds blow...."* It was a dark song, and fairly fitting. Lightning tore asunder the heavens. *"It's time to wield the blade..."* Harry's mind and memory were through. It was done, that was what he thought now. It was done.

Where had he heard it? He didn't remember. It was as if he were tuned in badly to a radio station, and everything was hazy with static. Thoughts were gone, memory was over, and he spoke once more before drifting into blissful unconsciousness.

*"You have been dying since the day you were born,"* he whispered. And finally, as thunder roared and lightning cackled, *"On through the dead of night... with the four Horsemen ride, or choose your fate and die!"*

On the last word, Harry's eyes flared open wide and lightning hit the ground a few feet away. It was over then. Defiance was done, and

the hero was home. He fell into forgetfulness and it was a long time before he knew anymore.

\*~\*~\*~\*

Across the world, in Scotland, Hogwarts castle, Ginny Weasley awoke in the early morning from a nightmare that had had something to do with Harry... but she supposed that was to be expected. Harry had disappeared two days ago, and it hurt to even think that.

Nothing but pain and bitter anguish enveloped Ginny as she awoke. Though she kept her eyes closed, they could not stop the fresh flow of desperate tears. Everything that had happened over the past few days ran through her mind and she searched for some hope that would help her keep her sanity.

The nightmare had seemed so real... Harry alone on a dark beach somewhere. It couldn't be real though, Harry was somewhere else. Lost to time and space, if her translation of Voldemort's spell was accurate. *Tempus ac Capacitas...*

Sniffing, Ginny picked up her wand from the bedside table and summoned her quill and ink, along with her diary.

*Everlasting Thoughts.*

Turning to a clean page, she shakily wrote the date in the right hand corner, pushing a strand of auburn hair back behind her ear as she did. Biting her bottom lip, cheeks streaked with tears, she poised the quill on the page.

*You're gone, she wrote, and I don't know if you're coming back.*

\*~\*~\*~\*

No sooner had the Guardian sent Harry back to his own world, than Existence as a whole became twisted and warped as one hundred years of time and events across many plains of existence were changed and rewrote.

Anywhere that Harry had been on the mortal worlds twisted, all the worlds destroyed and lives lost were replaced and trillions upon trillions of creatures lived again. A great shuddering reverberated through the threads of reality as the fabric rewrote itself to suit Harry's choices....

Everything had changed. It was a new dawn on what had become a dark existence. Life had a chance, for a time... The War of Creation had fought its first battle, and Light, Harry, had won.

But at the Ways of Twilight, before a door marked, ***Destiny***, a poison in the wood refused to be changed. It stayed... and the countdown to oblivion truly began.

Where was the Hero now?

The beginning *had* ended, one human's name reverberated down the Hall of Eternity, and the true fight was about to be set in motion. The destruction of Existence had been set back, but not stopped... Good was being consumed by Evil and it was only a matter of time....

The only hope lay with one of the mortal species of Existence, with humans. It lay on a world, in no way more significant than any other; it lay on a world with a boy who had lost his memory.

Redemption and salvation for everyone and everything rested on humans, and on their born leader, Harry James Potter.

*The                      End                      of                      Part                      Two*  
*of*  
*The Hero Trilogy*

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*